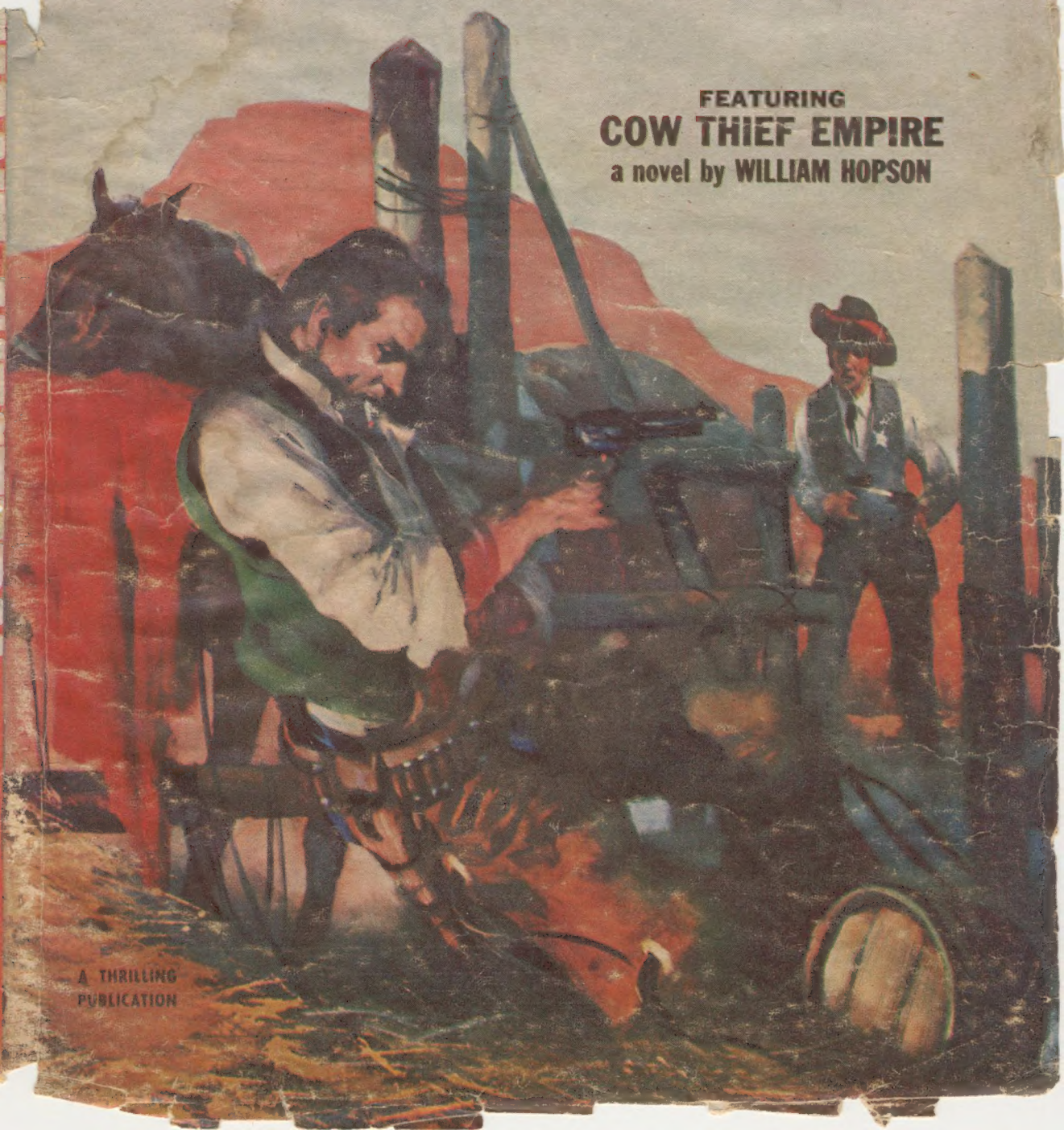
JUNE 25¢

Giant western

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW AND COMPLETE



FEATURING

COW THIEF EMPIRE

a novel by WILLIAM HOPSON

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Real Causes of TV Interference In This Area Revealed

A message to every TV set owner who is tired of paying $5-$10 for the same unnecessary service calls over and over again —and who is unfairly blaming his serviceman for something that is not his fault.

Have you ever wondered why your TV set can't be fixed—why your TV picture still gets aggravating wavy lines, streaks, distortions and zags — why high powered aerials, expensive new sets, even top flight servicemen often fail to stop this TV interference?

THE TRUTH ABOUT YOUR TV SET

It is a known fact that your TV antenna not only picks up the picture waves you see on your screen, but also picks up electric static waves that can ruin your picture.

THE REAL CAUSES OF TV INTERFERENCE

And the reason you or your repairman have never been able to block out this interference is because it does not come from within your TV set *but from sources outside your TV set!* These sources are the real cause of TV interference. These are what may cause your TV screen to flicker, flutter, streak or get hazy.

For instance, you yourself, realize that a doctor's diathermy machine up to 2½ miles from your home can ruin your TV viewing pleasure for hours on end.

But do you know that a car or truck passing your home can streak, distort your TV picture?

Do you know that nearby telephone lines or neon advertising signs, can make your screen flicker and flutter?

And do you know that any electrical appliance in your home—or your neighbor's home—can streak, distort and haze your TV picture for an entire evening?

ANY ONE OF THESE CAN CAUSE YOUR TV INTERFERENCE

Inside Your Home

- Electric toasters
- Vacuum cleaners
- Sewing machines
- Electric broilers
- Ringing telephone
- Phonographs
- Electric razors
- Refrigerators
- Oil burners
- Door bells
- Radios

Outside Your Home

- Cars
- Busses
- Trains
- Hospital machines
- Electric cash register
- Streetcars
- Trucks
- Doctor's diathermy machine
- Subways
- FM Radio interference

WHICH OF THESE TV HEADACHES DO YOU WANT TO STOP—IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

STREAKS caused by cars, trains, subways, cash registers, electrical appliances can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

WEAK PICTURE—TELERON CLARIFIES weak signal. Helps to hold picture bright and steady.

WAVY LINES caused by "Hams," FM broadcast stations, other TV sets, antennas, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

FADED PICTURE due to weak, static ridden signals can be CLARIFIED by TELERON before it reaches your set.

BORER EFFECT caused by doctor's diathermy machines, hospital machines, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON before it reaches your set.

TV STATIC caused by telephone lines, neon signs, atmospheric conditions, can be BLOCKED OUT by TELERON, before it reaches your set.

HOW TO STOP TV INTERFERENCE IN JUST 45 SECONDS!

The only way to eliminate TV interference is to BLOCK IT OUT, before it reaches your set —in exactly the same way sunlight glare is blocked out by sunglasses before it reaches your eyes.

1. You can install an antenna-filter to help reduce interference seeping through your antenna, BUT IT CANNOT STOP streaks, wavy lines or TV static due to interference pouring in through your wall socket.

2. Or you can fix your set yourself in just 45 seconds simply by clipping onto your set a new double protection filter circuit and power line plug that not only blocks out interference coming in through your antenna, but also blocks out interference coming through your wall socket. The name of this amazing invention is the TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP which actually blocks out these interference waves before they reach your set.

PICTURE-CLEAR RECEPTION IN JUST 45 SECONDS

Simply clip the TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP on to your set. It takes only 45 seconds —and fits every set made since 1947, regardless of make, model or year. See for yourself how this amazing invention gives you sharp, clear pictures; how it can add new life to your picture even in fringe areas—even in weak reception zones—even on channels you could hardly pick up before!

ORDER TODAY AND SAVE $2

If you order your Teleron Interference Trap today, you do not pay the $6 you'd expect, but only $3.98 — on this amazing no-risk guarantee: If 45 seconds after you clip this amazing TELERON INTERFERENCE TRAP on your set, you are not getting perfect picture-clear reception—please return for full money back. You try it at our risk. So send today to: Hastings Products, Inc., Teleron Div., Dept. T-742, 141 Fifth Ave., New York 10, N. Y.

© 1953 Hastings Products, Inc.

ORDER TODAY AND SAVE $2, MAIL COUPON NOW!

HASTINGS PRODUCTS INC., TELERON DIVISION, Dept. T-742
141 Fifth Avenue, New York 10, New York

Please send me the TV INTERFERENCE TRAP immediately, at $3.98, plus C.O.D. postage. I understand that satisfaction is guaranteed 100%, or my money is promptly refunded.

Name.....
(Please Print)

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

SAVE MORE! Send $4.00 with coupon. We pay all postage charges. Same Money-Back Guarantee.

NOW!
The Greatest
HOSPITALIZATION VALUE EVER OFFERED

Smiling and healthy today — in a Hospital bed tomorrow! Be ready!

Sky-high Hospital bills can wreck your life savings. Insure now!

We pay benefits for as long as you stay in Hospital. NO TIME LIMIT!

PROTECTS YOU and YOUR FAMILY

IN CASE OF **SICKNESS** or **ACCIDENT**..

No Time Limit HOSPITAL PLAN

PAYS BENEFITS FOR **FULL STAY** IN HOSPITAL

MAIL COUPON

COSTS ONLY **Pennies a Day**

WE PAY CASH DIRECT TO YOU

IN ADDITION TO WHAT YOU MAY COLLECT FROM OTHER INSURANCE

Go to the Hospital for a day, a week, a month, a year or longer — your "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays Benefits just as long as you stay — *there's absolutely no time limit!* What blessed help! What's more, the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy pays off in cash direct to you — regardless of what you may collect from any other insurance policy for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. This is important — it means you can carry the low cost "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy IN ADDITION to any other insurance — then collect two ways in case of Hospital confinement.

Policy Sold Only By Mail! Good Anywhere in U.S. & Possessions! If sickness or accident puts you in a Hospital bed — you'll look back and thank your lucky stars you were wise enough to take out the "NO TIME LIMIT" Policy. It's the sensible, practical way to protect your own bank account against the onslaught of high Hospital costs. So ACT TODAY! Do it before trouble strikes.

YOU CAN GET MATERNITY

For slight extra cost husband and wife can have a MATERNITY RIDER attached to their regular Policy and this will entitle the couple to a liberal Benefit for childbirth confinement and care.

ACCIDENTAL DEATH, SURGERY, POLIO INCLUDED

We give you more coverage, better coverage, longer coverage at low cost. You get generous Hospital Room and Board Benefits for sickness or accident (rest homes, sanitariums and Govt. Hospitals excluded) . . . you get Cash Benefits for 73 Surgical Operations . . . Lump Cash for accidental death . . . Cash Payment for loss of eyes, hands, feet . . . special Polio Protection, etc. One Policy covers individual or entire family, birth to age 75. You'll see the low costs in the booklet we send you. DON'T TAKE CHANCES — BE PROTECTED. Send for our FREE BOOK which tells all about this remarkable insurance.

DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S TOO LATE! ACT NOW!

POLICY BACKED BY STRONG RELIABLE COMPANY

We do business in all 48 states and U. S. possessions. Claims are paid promptly in strict accordance with Policy provisions.

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA
Wilmington 99, Delaware

***Mail Coupon for* FREE BOOK**

NO OBLIGATION
NO AGENT WILL CALL

RUSH COUPON FOR VALUABLE FREE BOOK

LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NORTH AMERICA
Dept. 653-TG, Wilmington 99, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, full details about your new, low cost NO TIME LIMIT HOSPITAL Plan. No agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ..... State .....

EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

Giant western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 11
NO. 3

JUNE
1953

COMPLETE NOVEL

COW THIEF EMPIRE.....William Hopson 10

He thought cattlemen were tough until he ran into a cattle queen who was tougher than any man! Follow Stony Burns as he rides into the Panhandle—bringing along the makings for a last-ditch showdown!

NOVELETS

THE DAMNED DIE OLD..G. Davisson Lough 102

Andy Singleton's struggle with himself was tougher than the grim four-cornered battle for ghost town loot

A DEVIL ON THE CATTLE TRAIL .....Caddo Cameron 128

He'd emerge as a coward or a hero—but the cards were stacked against the kid in his bitter fight

SHORT STORIES

FRONTIER POST.....T. C. McClary 82

Spit and polish had little part in a soldier's life

A BRIDE COMES TO DRY GULCH.....Mark Miller 97

Ordering a women via mail order sure kicks up a ruckus

THE GLASS BALL.....Fred Delano 119

The reward offer looked phony to the two-bit rancher

FEATURES

FUR, FINS AND FEATHERS...Francis H. Ames 6

A department conducted by a hunting and fishing expert

THE VENGEANCE OF JIM RILEY.....Norman B. Wiltsey 94

A dramatic true story of a grim Kansas gunfight

See Page 7 for a list of other special features in this issue

SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

GIANT WESTERN. Published every other month and copyright 1953 by Best Publications, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription: (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. June, 1953, issue. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

the Fifty Thousand Dollar Minute .

by

Hillard Wilson

IT was 6:15 in the evening of a bright fall day. Bill Rhodes was standing on the corner of 42nd and Fifth Avenue.

And as he stood there and watched the never-ending stream of automobiles flow by, a feeling of resentment rose within him.

"Why," he asked himself, "should I be forever struggling along on a small salary when so many other men have found wealth? They are only men, aren't they? They have only two hands, two legs, one mind? What is the magic something that makes one man a success and the other a failure?"

Bill Rhodes shook his head. Many times he had asked himself this same question but he had never been able to answer it satisfactorily.

This time he might have pursued the subject further, but just then an automobile stopped directly in front of him and a strangely familiar voice called out —

"Bill Rhodes! Of all men! What in the world are you doing here? Don't you remember me? Jim Williams?"

Yes, Bill did remember him. Five years before they had worked together for the same company. They had been fast friends and good pals. And here was Jim Williams in his own Cadillac! Had he found a gold mine? Had he struck oil?

Jim laughed. "Neither," he said, "but something a whole lot better. Step in the car and we'll ride about a bit. I want to talk to you about old times."

Bill stepped in and eased back into the luxurious cushions. As they rode along, he told Jim with just a trace of sadness, how he was still working at the same old place and at almost the old salary. How he had married and had two children! How how hard it was sometimes to make both ends meet!

Jim Williams listened attentively. Then suddenly he put his hand on Bill's shoulder.

"Bill," he said seriously, "I want to tell you something. Five years ago we were working together at the same job — and the same low wages. We used to wish we could get ahead, but that's all we ever did — just wish.

"And then one night I happened to see an advertisement in one of the magazines. It told about the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton and how they had helped so many men to success through spare-time study. Right there I decided that I would be one of these trained men.

"I remember telling you about sending in the coupon. And I remember how you laughed and said I was just wasting my time and my money. But I wasn't, Bill! It was the best investment I ever made.

"I have figured it out and I have found that the minute I spent in marking and mailing that coupon has been worth $50,000 to me. In other words, I have made just $50,000 more in the last five years than if I had stayed at the old job. And I say very frankly that I owe my advancement to the I.C.S.

"What I have done, Bill, you can do. If anything, you have a better mind to begin with than I had. But you have never made use of it."

As Jim Williams finished, he looked intently at Bill, half fearful that he might have hurt his feelings. But Bill was made of sterner stuff.

"Jim," he said slowly, "I want to thank you for what you have said. You had your $50,000 minute. I say that I'm going to have mine. Tonight I, too, am going to send in the coupon that has started so many men on the up-road to success."

How much longer are you going to wait before taking the step that is bound to bring you advancement and more money?

The way is easy. Without cost, without obligation, mark and mail this coupon. It takes only a three-cent stamp and a $50,000 minute of your time, but it is the most important thing you can do today.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS
Box 3967, Scranton 9, Pa.

Without cost, send me free book, "HOW TO SUCCEED" and free catalog on course checked.

- ☐ Accounting
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Drawing
- ☐ Automobile Mechanic
- ☐ Auto-Elec. Technician
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Diesel Engines
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Television
- ☐ General Radio
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Hydro-Electric Power Plant
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instruments
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Mathematics
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Practical Accounting
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Railroad
- ☐ Railway Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Textiles
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Traffic Management

Other_____

Name_____ Age_____

Home Address_____

City_____ State_____

Occupation_____

Special tuition rates to members of Armed Forces. Canadian residents address International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Montreal.

FUR, FINS and FEATHERS

A Department Conducted by FRANCIS H. AMES, Hunting and Fishing Expert

THIS is the time of year to get out after the most popular fish in the nation, the large-mouth black bass. His popularity stems from the fact that he is found in every state in the country, is an unpredictable battler, from which anything can be expected.

Cowboys and ranchers, dry land farmers, who have previously never had a rod in their hands, are now becoming black bass fishing converts, due to the fact that this stocky fighter has been planted extensively in man-made lakes throughout the West. Ranchers and farmers are now aware of the value of saving run-off waters, and are using modern bulldozers to build dams to hold them. Large bass lakes are being formed by government projects of this nature. Trout would curl up and die in many of these waters, but Mr. Bronze Back loves them.

It has only been in recent years that the full sporting possibilities of this fish have been realized, even by veteran anglers. The large-mouth has been largely taken in the past by the use of the short casting rod, and a gang hooked plug heavy enough to be thrown by such an outfit.

This equipment seriously reduced the acrobatics and length of fight of the fish.

The black bass is an irate, explosive character, with a cantankerous temper. On any outfit he'll tail walk, turn pinwheels in the air, and toss the plug back into the boat at times like a bullet. If you really want to see what he'll do, take him on a fly rod with flies or bass bugs. He'll not only take flies, but he'll engulf them with a splash akin to a pack mule falling off a cut-bank in the Rockies.

One of the major reasons flies have not been extensively used for bass in years past is because of the difficulty in tossing flies into the brushy, weedy, snaggy places he loves to inhabit. The lakes and ponds being produced in the arid sections of the country afford room along their banks, in most cases, to swing a steer around by the tail.

Spinning tackle, which I personally feel is poor equipment for fast trout streams, is ideal for bass on lakes and placid ponds. It will throw flies, using a single buckshot for weight, and will toss plugs light enough to permit the bass to really get in there and do his stuff in the manner with which he is fully capable. The wide popularity which spinning gear is attaining in this country, is certain to further increase the popularity of this worth while fighting fish.

Drifting a skiff in a still lagoon, casting for bass, is one of the most soul satisfying and beguiling sports known to man. Whenever I encounter an avid bass fisherman, I usually find a gent it will do to ride the river with. Such a man must be able to take success or defeat in stride, be a persistent, dogged fellow, who loves still waters, the quiet of evening, the mists of dawn, good weather and bad. If he is a bass fisherman he's bound to be acquainted with all these, and have found them to be very much to his liking.

I know, for I've met such men poling bateaus on southern lagoons, overhung with Spanish moss, musical with the mourning of turtle doves. I've met them on storm-blown lakes, their collars philosophically turned up against rain and sleet. They're always ready with a grin, a pleasant word. I often ask myself if bass anglers are born that way, or whether years of matching wits with this undershot monarch of snaggy and weed strewn waters has made them what they are. It is a thing to ponder on.

For Questions and Answers, See Pages 100-101

Special Features in This Issue of

GIANT WESTERN

- **WHEN THE EAGLE RODE**
  A surprising true anecdote
  MURRAY T. PRINGLE 9
- **ROCKY'S SIGHCOLOGY**
  The fighter from the West
  BOB and JAN YOUNG 25
- **GOLD RUSH**
  A California tall tale
  JACK KYTLE 37
- **TRA LA LA**
  An amusing Western limerick
  PECOS PETE 51
- **HUNTING AND FISHING**
  Questions and answers
  FRANCIS H. AMES 100
- **WESTERN TIDBITS**
  Cowtown news and facts
  HAROLD HELFER 109
- **COW COUNTRY QUIZ**
  Testing your Western knowledge
  ILLUSTRATION 127
- **GOLD IN THEM TREES**
  Jokers in Downieville
  JACK BENTON 135

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you realize what hard jobs our men are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men — whenever you invest in Defense Bonds. For Bonds strengthen our economy — to produce the arms and food and care that make our men secure."

Peace is for the strong! For peace and prosperity save with U. S. Defense Bonds!

Now E Bonds pay 3%! Now, improved Series E Bonds start paying interest after 6 months. And average 3% interest, compounded semiannually when held to maturity! Also, all *maturing* E Bonds automatically *go on* earning—at the new rate—for 10 *more* years. Today, start investing in U. S. Series E Defense Bonds through the Payroll Savings Plan at work.

to introduce you to the thrills and excitement in every issue of RANCH ROMANCES...

SPECIAL GET-ACQUAINTED OFFER

32 Weeks (16 Issues) Only $3

Regular single copy price $4 — or 33⅓% more!

RANCH ROMANCES packs one of the biggest one-two reading punches in America — an exciting combination of pulse-quickening LOVE and thrill-a-minute WESTERN ADVENTURE.

We think that once you start reading RANCH ROMANCES regularly, you'll never want to be without it. That's why we make this money-saving introductory offer —

HERE'S A ROUND-UP OF RANCH ROMANCES' OUTSTANDING FEATURES:

Thrill-packed fiction — including at least one novel and many short stories in every issue. And all stories are BRAND NEW — written by America's top authors.

Daring Romance — a basic ingredient in every RANCH ROMANCES' story.

True Tales of the West — stranger-than-fiction yarns about the people and places that made the Old West the Wild West.

Western News from Hollywood — the information on Western flickers and stars in every issue of RANCH ROMANCES for your movie-going enjoyment—written by the famous movie star, ROBERT CUMMINGS.

Plus—the rodeo news—Out of the Chutes—crossword puzzles, hilarious cartoons, a personal correspondence column, your horoscope and MUCH, MUCH MORE!

32 weeks (16 big issues) for only $3

Your sixteen issues of RANCH ROMANCES will bring you more than 2,000 stirring pages . . . the equivalent of ten full-price books. Just think what you'd pay for ten good books — then compare it with the $3 your sixteen issues of RANCH ROMANCES will cost you!

But don't delay. Fill out and mail the coupon below *today!*

RANCH ROMANCES • *10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.*

Yes, I want to take advantage of your money-saving offer! Here's my $3 for a 32 week introductory subscription (16 big issues) to RANCH ROMANCES.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....**Zone**.....**State**.....

GW-6

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage; $1.00 for foreign)

When the Eagle Rode

By MURRAY T. PRINGLE

WORLD WAR II G. I.'s and cowpokes of the 1870's had one thing in common—both were souvenir-mad. If you turned an old-time cowpuncher's pockets wrong side out you were sure to find a gold nugget, an Indian arrow head, an elk tooth or some similar keepsake.

Some of the lads kept a sharp eye peeled for any natural curiosity that might possibly bring a buck or two from the Smithsonian Institution. In quest of such items men would run great risks with sometimes unexpected results. Take the case of a pair of Northwest scouts named Jim Scott and Sam Woody.

A large band of hot-blooded young bucks had jumped a Crow Indian reservation and were riding hell-for-leather along the warpath. Scott and Woody were trailing them. Jim was riding a paint and Sam had a mule. Somewhere along the way the scouts happened on an enormous bald eagle, helpless from gorging at a carcass.

"Glory be!" said Sam. "Jest look at that critter! Biggest damn bird I ever did see! Reckon them fellers in Washington would pay a purty for him eh, Jim?"

Dismounting, Scott and Woody closed in on the bird. Jim brought a heavy chunk of wood crashing down on its head. A brief examination by Sam who pronounced it "deader'n hell," and the specimen was tied to the back of Sam's saddle.

The pair had barely remounted when a Crow war party suddenly broke from ambush. Spurring their horses frantically, the two white men beat a hasty retreat. Flattened out over the necks of their mounts to escape the hail of bullets and arrows coming their way, the scouts urged their animals to greater speed.

A bullet nosed into the earth scant inches from the mule's head and kicked a spurt of dust into the animal's face. That did it; the fleeing mule spun around with such force it almost unseated Sam and began heading straight for the Indians!

Cursing wildly, Sam did his best to get the beast under control and headed in a safer direction. It was useless. Breathing a prayer, Sam flattened himself out till he was practically under the mule's skin as it took him closer and closer to sure death.

By now the hapless Sam was so close to his pursuers he could practically smell 'em. Another bullet burned his way, missed, but neatly severed the thong binding the eagle's wings. Then Sam got the shock of his life. He found himself riding double!

The eagle he had pronounced dead had come back to life! Only knocked out by the blow, Sam's wild riding had revived the bird.

The Indian war party took one long incredulous look at what was heading their way and with wild yells of pure terror yanked their horses about and fled in panic. The superstitious savages, sure they were being pursued by some devil who one moment appeared to be a man then suddenly transformed itself into a screaming eagle mounted on horseback, took off as though jet-propelled.

Jim Scott, however, had an entirely different view of the demon. What Scott saw was a screaming eagle, its steely talons embedded in the rump of an insane mule, its wings outspread and beating the air and its beak drilling a hole in Sam's back who was also screaming, swearing and praying, all at the same time. The mule, still pursuing the fleeing Indians, would pause every few minutes to buck and bray at the agony caused by the eagle's claws.

Jim Scott finally caught up to his partner, took care of things and the pair returned to town with a story which no one would have believed if Sam hadn't been able to back it up with beak marks in his back and claw marks on the mule's rump.

What? Hell, no, the Smithsonian didn't get that eagle!

COW THIEF

He thought cattlemen were tough—until he

ran into a cattle queen who was tougher than any man

I

THEY had told Stony at the Rafter R outfit, where he had enjoyed overnight hospitality, that if he'd ride on due south toward those far distant twin buttes of sandstone out there on the prairie, he'd hit one of the Snyder woman's line camps—the beginning of her fabulous holdings eighty miles square. He passed the buttes

EMPIRE

A Novel by WILLIAM HOPSON

Two of Stony's fingers began to sink steadily deeper into the boss's eyes

about noon and on the distant knolls saw a cabin of red sandstone, a small corral and sheds. He sent his black gelding up the gentle slope at a leisurely walk.

A brown and white mongrel dog bayed at him as he approached, and two women appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. The dog, apparently satisfied with a closer inspection, trotted alongside the black as Stony rode up and looked down at a middle-aged woman of perhaps forty and a much younger one, obviously a daughter.

"Howdy, ma'am," Stony said and touched a hand to the brim of his old stetson. "I was told this would be one of the line camps of the Snyder spread."

"Why, yes, it is," the older woman said. "Were you looking for the home ranch?"

"Yes, ma'am," Stony said. He thought, They're uneasy for some reason or other.

The woman said, "Won't you light and come in? I'm Mrs. Ed Yerkes and this is my daughter Jean. Pa's cooking for the roundup crew fifteen or twenty miles south of here. They should be through most any day now."

He swung to the ground, a little self-conscious because of his heavy cartridge belt and pistol, and his big rifle in a scabbard on the saddle. He knew there was little in his lean, dark features and untrimmed mustache to inspire trust in two lone women in a line camp miles from ranch headquarters. And yet he had a feeling that his presence had brought a kind of relief to them.

He said, "I'm Stony Burns, Mrs. Yerkes. My father lost his life on the Snyder spread some time back. I rode down to see about a headstone or slab, and to thank the owner for what she did for him."

He caught the look in Mrs. Yerkes' eyes as she glanced at her pretty daughter. Just a brief flash that might have meant anything before it was gone. Jean came forward and extended a hand. She was light-haired and blue-eyed with a lithe, erect young body and firmly rounded bosom. She looked clean and cool, crisp and competent.

STONY thought, She's not over twenty-one, and she's certainly pretty. I'll bet the Snyder woman don't have any trouble keeping men on *this* part of her boundaries, even if line riding in Texas in the winter is a tough job.

He removed his hat and went inside. Mrs. Yerkes indicated a chair with a rawhide back and bottom.

"Sit down," she said. "We're glad to see you, Mr. Burns."

"Just call me Stony, ma'am," he corrected, and grinned.

She laughed and he thought he detected a sudden release of uneasiness in her, perhaps even fear.

"All right, Stony. We're glad you stopped by because Pa'll need a change of clothes, and you can take them to him. Jean and me have just had our dinner, but it's still warm on the back of the stove. If you want to water your horse before you eat, Jean will show you where."

He walked beside the girl in the light summer dress down to the creek. In it was a large barrel with the bottom knocked out and buried to gravel level and now full of clear, cool water.

"So you're Poke Burns's son?" Jean asked curiously as Stony let the black sink its warm muzzle deep into the water. At his nod she went on, "He was a good friend of Ed's—that's what I mostly call my father. During roundups he drove the hooligan wagon while Pa cooked. Winters, when Pa was line riding up here, your father drove the supply wagon and brought us all the news we ever got up this way."

He thought, That was my father, all right. Old and half-crippled, but too

proud to sit in a warm hotel lobby and play checkers. Out with a wagon because he wouldn't live off a son's money.

He said, "This is the first time I recollect ever seeing women in a line camp. I'd think it would get pretty lonesome."

"Oh—" She hesitated, then laughed a wholesome laugh like her mother's. "I have lots of books and writing paper and things, so we manage to keep busy. Of course, it was better before Dad Snyder

died when we spent the winters at ranch headquarters. But I really don't mind the line camp."

Gallant little liar, Stony Burns thought, and gave her a sidewise glance. You're not married yet, either, when plenty of other Texas kids even younger than you have got married to the first man who asked them—anything to break the monotony of a lonely life. You're lonely—for some reason you and your mother are both so uneasy you're almost scared to death.

The sleek black gelding lifted its dripping muzzle and turned its head as if to say, "That's enough water. How about something to eat?"

The girl said, "Let's take him up to the corral. We always have plenty of oats in the feed crib."

In the small corral he removed the bridle while she brought out oats and poured them into a trough of heavy boards licked to a bright yellow glaze by other horses. At the house, Stony washed his face and hands at a bench along the wall beside the kitchen door and accepted the clean towel Jean handed to him.

While he ate mother and daughter talked, as if hungry themselves for someone to talk to. Mrs. Yerkes said: "I guess we'll be moving into town one of these fall days, Jean and me."

Jean had gone into another room where she was making up a package of clothing for her father, including a pair of the heavy winter drawers Ed Yerkes always wore to prevent saddle chafe.

Mrs. Yerkes went on, "We've been on the ranch a long time now, and it was good when Dad Snyder was alive. We stayed at headquarters winters, Ed doing the cooking for about thirty of the hands while the rest were out in line camps and such. Irene—she's Dad Snyder's daughter—she now has the ranch divided up into four main sections with a winter foreman and his men taking care of one part from a regular ranch house. It's really four ranches of twenty sections all wrapped up in one."

SHE laughed again, but her still handsome face with its clean, wholesome look quickly sobered.

"It was a good life for us then, Stony," she said with surprising frankness and no complaint. "Dances among the ranch hands' families and people from town almost every Saturday night. Cow pony races and roping nearly every Saturday afternoon, and every now and then a barbecue. Dad Snyder liked to have people around him, lots of people. He was so big and jolly, trying to cover up his hurt about a woman who ran away, and may be disappointed that Irene wasn't a son. Then one night, while he was asleep,

his heart just quit beating, and since then—" She lifted her work-worn hands from her lap and let them fall back again.

"And since then," Stony added bluntly for her, "the Cattle Baroness of the Panhandle, as folks call her, has changed the old order. A beautiful woman, but cold, ruthless—and with at least one man on her payroll who has notches on his gun. Man named Mike Le Feur. We've heard of her up above Tascosa in the Nations country."

The dog bayed again, a bellowing bawl, and through the open doorway of the rock-walled kitchen, Stony saw that the hackles on the animal's back were up. A horse's hoof struck a rock with the sound of a pistol shot, then the horse trotted around a corner and a man swung down. Jean was just coming into the kitchen with a neatly wrapped package, and in her face, as well as in her mother's, was that uneasiness again.

The man who stepped inside, removing his hat, was possibly twenty-eight and was no cowpuncher or rancher. His Eastern clothes, clean-shaven face and neatly trimmed hair, his obvious intelligence proclaimed him a man of authority.

He said, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Yerkes. Jean, you look lovely. But you always do."

As he spoke to them, though, his piercing, coldly hostile eyes were on the man in worn riding clothes who sat rolling a cigarette. "Who're you, mister?" he asked sharply.

"He's a friend of ours, Mr. Holmes," Mrs. Yerkes answered quickly—a little too quickly, Stony thought. "He's Poke Burns's son."

"I see. That old cripple Irene kept around simply because Mr. Snyder liked him and he had no place else to go? I didn't know—" a touch of sarcasm was in his voice—"he had a son. Whatever business you have here, Burns, please finish it and be on your way. If you're a competent and willing worker, we can probably find a place for you. But this is a business organization now, and there is no room in it for saddle tramps who are hunting a soft winter job. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear enough, I reckon," Stony said and rose to his feet. "Maybe a lot more than you figured, mister. When I first reached this place these two women were uneasy. They've been uneasy ever since I rode up to that door there—the one I'm going to throw you through in just a minute. I couldn't figure out why until I saw the hackles go up on that pup's neck. You've been here before, for I never saw a good dog fooled by the wrong kind of a man." And Stony added softly, "So you better start riding right back where you came from, pronto, Holmes."

Holmes wore an immaculately tailored gray coat over his white shirt and now his hand dropped down to the heavy pistol at his right hip beneath the garment. He might be from the East, but he was fearless and his arrogance made him dangerous.

"I'm the business manager of the Snyder Cattle Company," he informed coolly, "and my word on this ranch is law. Get on your horse and ride—north."

"I've just come from that direction," Stony said easily. "And if you try to throw that gun on me, you'll get hurt real bad."

Holmes tried it and with remarkable speed. His hand started to flash up but Stony's left hand blocked the draw and Holmes saw an unshaved face and a hard fist both close to his eyes. The shocking impact of the knuckles backed up by one hundred and seventy pounds of lean, whipcord muscles slammed the man back against the door jamb. As he fell out the door, he tried to jerk his gun up and Stony's boot lashed out hard at his wrist. A grunt of pain broke from Holmes's lips and the pistol spun away three feet onto the rockly ground.

"Get up," Stony said coldly. "Get up and go back and tell your boss I'm coming to thank her for what she did for my father."

HOLMES got to his feet and instinctively bent to brush at his clothes, his lips thin. He looked at Stony, making no effort to recover the pistol.

He said in a flat, deadly voice, "You'd better send the message by mail, mister. You'd better get out of this country if you want to stay alive."

He swung into saddle, wrenched hard at the bay horse's mouth, and a grunt of pain came from the animal as he spurred down across the dry, gravelly bed of the creek and took the opposite slope at a half-running lope.

Stony turned slowly, standing there bareheaded with black hair hanging down over his forehead, unshaved and in worn clothes. He looked at Jean and Mrs. Yerkes, standing in the doorway.

"I hope I guessed right about him, Mrs. Yerkes," he said mildly.

"You did." She nodded. "Nobody has been able to figure out why he and Irene never got married, him being the manager and she the owner. Maybe he found out she's too hard and cold. But he's been coming here two or three times a week since early summer. Pa didn't like it, but he's more'n fifty, and has been on this ranch since before the War."

"Would it be any better if you moved to town?"

"I don't know, Stony. He's a very determined man, and he's got money and men to back him up— We'll fix you up some food so's you won't get hungry on the way back."

He grinned a little, a half-grin that made his somewhat unkempt appearance forgotten. He took the package from Jean.

He said, "Just tell me about where I can find the roundup wagon and I'll see that a friend of my father gets some clean clothes."

II

STONY went out to the corral, bridled the black gelding, cinched up tight again, and rode back to the house. The midday fall sun was hot on his bared head. At the door Jean Yerkes silently passed him his hat, a new kind of uneasiness in her face now.

"You've made an enemy and a bad one, Stony," she told him. "He's more powerful than you think—but you were right about the pup. He knew, too. I— I don't think we'll be waiting long to move into town. You've humbled Jeff Holmes in front of us—in front of me, to speak frankly—and he'll certainly try to come back stronger."

"I'll see that Ed Yerkes gets the clothes," was all Stony said, and grinned down at Jean and her mother.

He left them there in the doorway with that new apprehension in their eyes and rode up the opposite slope. He had started to swing wide of Jeff Holmes' trail, when he remembered the man hadn't carried a rifle on his saddle, thought of the pistol back there, and grinned angrily. He thought, He's dignified, he's got education and he looks down his long, thin nose at low-down cowpunchers and their families. Must have hurt him plum bad when Jean didn't fall right over in his big, strong arms.

When he reached the top of the second ridge, ahead of him the prairie rose and fell undulatingly; brown waves covered with good fall grass and dotted here and there by cedar clumps and the ubiquitous mesquite. Panhandle Texas cattle range at its best, much like the great acreage the Indians up in the Nations country leased to many big outfits for grazing. Six hundred and forty sections here grazing twelve thousand Snyder head with plenty of good winter range to spare.

Monument to a big, rugged man who had been known as Dad Snyder.

A startled deer bounded up out of a gully where it had been drinking at a stagnant water hole and sped away into the distance where antelope lay in the shade and belched up grass from one stomach, chewed it leisurely, and swallowed into another for later digestion.

A few miles farther on Stony spotted

the first steers—about five or six hundred—grazing in a long red and mottled line, showing that they had been pushed away from the main roundup and were moving northward for winter range. Line riders on the northern boundary would hold them, and also push back any strays from the Rafter R outfit that had drifted too far south.

A moving fence in place of barbed wire and posts, which had not yet put in appearance on the great open ranges.

Stony rode in among the cattle, watching as they lifted their heads, then trotted off with horns held high in the air in that peculiar attitude of wild cattle toward any approaching rider. Prime three-year-old stuff that would give a trail crew plenty of hell on the drive northward next spring, and bring in to Irene Snyder's already well-filled coffers more of the Eastern buyers' gold.

A rider appeared in the distance and Stony rode to meet him. The distant puncher disappeared from sight in a draw with tall grass on both banks, and almost immediately a dozen or more steers lunged into view and trotted toward the main herd. A faint whoop floated on the afternoon air as the cowhand appeared again. He came forward at a fast lope and pulled up short, a freckle-faced youth all of twenty years old.

"Howdy." He grinned and lolled in the saddle. "You looking for the Snyder outfit, mister?"

"That's right." Stony nodded.

He saw the youth's eyes appraising him, and yet trying to pretend not to. In Stony's lean and certainly not handsome face were deep lines along each side of the nose and at the outer corners of his black eyes. Worn clothes, a heavy pistol, and a rifle in a saddle scabbard. A slicker roll containing a blanket and change of clothes and a few personal articles. Also the package Jean Yerkes had given him to deliver.

The young puncher turned in the saddle, standing on a stiffened right leg for elevation. He pointed. "Right over yonder back of that far ridge two-three miles. Too bad you didn't come along a little sooner. You could of rode in with Jeff Holmes, the ranch manager—only we got to call him *Mr.* Holmes when he's around." The grin came again. "He'd been up a-courting Ed Yerkes's girl, but from the way he looked when he sloped past here he ain't done so good. He was sure boiling mad about something."

STONY said drily, "I expect I can find the place."

"Sure! Just keep going the way you are. If you're looking for a winter job you might get on. Me, I've got eight months wages saved up and no norther is a-going to freeze the seat of my pants off this winter. Not for Tony Williams."

"The name is Burns," Stony said. "Thanks for the information."

"Burns?" Williams stared. "Say, you any kin to old Poke who got killed this summer?"

"My father. Where did they bury him?"

"Down at the ranch graveyard. 'Bout fifteen mile from here. Me and some of the boys burned his name on a headboard and put it up at his grave. It was about all we could do for him," Williams spoke apologetically.

"That's why I came," Stony said, and lifted the reins. "To put up a stone and to thank Miss Snyder."

"Why—uh—sure. She's down at the wagon tallying up with the reps of several other outfits. Keeps a check each year on how many strays come over, and when we get as many as we had this year you can get that there's going to be some plain and fancy hell a-popping. —Well, I got to push this bunch two-three more mile north. So long."

He loped away and Stony Burns rode on toward the distant rise in the prairie until at last he came out on top and saw in a two-mile basin below him the big roundup outfit. Through his glasses he could make out the hooligan wagon, piled high with bedrolls, already pulling away,

though the fly was still up in back of the huge chuckwagon. Around it were possibly a dozen or so saddled horses with men standing around.

Near the fly was a bright new black surrey hooked to a span of dappled gray horses. A mile or so beyond the outfit a dark mass moved on southward at a graze. This would be the cows and herd bulls, yearlings and two-year-olds, thrown back to graze all winter until time for the new calf roundup again the following spring.

Apparently the Snyder woman grazed her beef stuff on the north part of her holdings during winter. Stony, with a preconceived opinion of her that was not favorable, would have bet the reason was to save a few miles on the long drive to Kansas.

He jogged on down into the basin and rode toward the wagon. Two different bunches of cattle were being driven away, and Stony guessed that these were strays the reps from other outfits had spotted and cut out to be driven back to their home ranges.

Keen, appraising eyes swung his way as Stony rode up on the black. It was always this way when a stranger appeared at a roundup wagon. The rider might be a hungry saddle-bum misfit hoping for an invitation to good chuck for a lean belly; a saddle tramp hunting any kind of a job. Likely as not he would be riding with his head turned back over one shoulder, watching the skyline.

Holmes had arrived and now stood with a tin cup of black coffee in one hand, gun sheath still empty, his pale, ocean-gray eyes boring first into Stony's and then flicking to the group of men.

Stony ignored him and swung down. His own eyes were upon the woman who sat in the shade made by the long canvas "fly" stretched out behind the chuckwagon to form a shelter.

She appeared to be about twenty-six, and seen sitting before a warm fireplace in a snug home would have done something to the man fortunate enough to have married her. At the moment, however, her face was aflame with anger at an elderly rancher whose appearance indicated not too much prosperity. She pushed back from the small table covered with papers and flung down her pencil.

She wore boots, a fringed leather riding skirt, and a man's blue cotton shirt, which fitted snugly over her bosom and was open at the neck. She removed her stetson and even in the shade her russet hair shone like a copper-colored sunset after a rain.

"I'm giving you a final warning, Jed," she said to the man who stood waiting and obviously ill at ease. "Those strays eat my grass and cost me money each year to get them separated again. Year before last when you began ranching over there it was forty-seven head. Last year seventy-four. And now this year one hundred and twenty-three head of your strays have showed up during this roundup!"

THE man called Jed protested, "But I tell you, Irene, I couldn't help it. I ain't got money to hire line riders like you have. And besides,"—a note of stubbornness came into his voice—"it happens with every outfit in the country, big or small. When your father was alive he—"

"Don't bring his name in, Jed," she cut in icily. "You have your final warning. My line riders this winter will have strict orders. The next time any of your stuff is found on my range, they'll drop them with a rifle."

Stony stood there, though he had seen all of Irene Snyder he cared to see. His preconceived opinion of her had been right. He was watching Jeff Holmes, noting that one of his lips was slightly swollen. Stony was grinning sardonically, until he saw Holmes nod and heard a voice speak behind him. He turned.

The man standing there was thirty-five or thereabouts, tall, gun-belted, and with the same arrogance Holmes displayed. Maybe, Stony thought, it was a sort of disease they caught from the

woman they worked for.

The man, whom Stony took to be the wagon boss, jerked a thumb toward the black gelding. He said harshly, "Jeff warned you not to come on this ranch, Burns. You were damned fool enough to do it anyhow. The only reason you wasn't knocked off your horse with a rifle slug was because your old man used to work here. Now get going!"

Stony hit him as he had hit Jeff Holmes—a smashing blow in the mouth that shot pain through his own knuckles when they crashed against teeth. He drove a second blow deep into the man's hard belly that doubled the fellow up, and as the wagon boss toppled, Stony's right knee came up. There was something savage in the lash of it, like a battering ram under the man's chin that straightened him up with arms wide apart. Then he fell forward and lay face down on the boot-scarred grass with those arms outflung

Stony swung to the other punchers. His right hand was close to the heavy pistol at his thigh. Some of them shifted uneasily, and one small, swarthy, wiry-looking man smiled. But none of them moved or spoke, and Stony knew why.

Irene Snyder was here. She would handle the matter herself.

He turned casually and met the cold, speculative gaze from her lead-gray eyes. As she looked him over, he thought he detected a brief flash of grim amusement. She looked at Holmes.

"Is this the one, Jeffrey?" she asked.

He nodded and covered his lip with the rim of the cup.

"What were you doing in the Yerkes line camp at noon today, Burns?" she demanded.

"I had a couple of errands," Stony said. "I had to trim the ears of a jackass and deliver some clean laundry. I also sort of had an idea of riding down to put up a stone or headboard over a man's grave, and thank you for anything you might have done for Poke Burns, my father. But I got a pretty good idea he earned his keep. So the thanks won't be necessary, I reckon."

He turned his back on her and untied the package Jean Yerkes had given him. He said, "This is for Ed Yerkes from his family."

"Oh, Ed!" she called to the cook. "Come here."

Yerkes shuffled out and took the package with a nod of thanks. Stony saw a man still loyal to an owner who had been a friend and who now had not the youth and strength to break away from the new order. A man so beaten down that he had not the courage to disapprove openly the attention of Holmes to his daughter.

Yerkes went back and Stony turned to the black to mount.

"You come back here, Burns!" commanded the woman sharply. "I'm not through with you yet!"

He swung up and looked down at her, and the grin on his unshaved face was not one of mirth. It was a cold smile of contempt. He said, "But I'm through with you, ma'am. My job is finished—it's been done for me—and I'll be heading back north to the Nations country."

III

AS STONY reined the black away from the big wagon, he heard a man groaning himself to consciousness, and he heard Irene Snyder's voice stridently commanding: "Mike!"

"Hey you, meester," a voice called softly.

Stony turned in the saddle. The small, wiry-looking puncher with a growth of pitch-black whiskers, the man who had grinned when Stony had put down the wagon boss, was standing with a gun in his hand. Mike LeFeur wasn't grinning now.

"You hear what the boss she say? You come back."

Stony grunted, "I heard her, mister."

"Then you come back an' get off the horse. 'Cause if you don't step down, then by tam, you gonna tumble down."

Those part French eyes were sighting

along the still leveled gun.

Stony knew the type. Less than forty years before, the city of Portland, Oregon Territory, had been laid out, and there was speculation at the time that some day it might grow to be as large as Oregon City. It was a land of French *voyageurs* and British officers with titles, buckskin trappers and immigrants from the distant Missouri; men who married Indian girls, but more often took them without benefit of clergy and raised pretty half-breed girls of remarkable beauty. Each year the men made the long trip south to trade at the Mexican settlements, taking their women and children with them on a round of dancing and drinking and carousing. It was not common for some of them to remain.

Somewhere back in the past, Mike LeFeur's father probably had remained and taken a native wife. From her womb had come this man with the pistol—a mixture of Indian, Spanish, and French, with the quaint language of his sire still rolling from his hairy lips.

Stony looked at the leveled six-shooter, at the wagon boss now sitting up with his face buried in both hands and spitting blood and groaning. Some of the idling men were grinning at Stony, and he felt his face flush and rage at the Snyder woman's arrogance burn through his veins like fire.

He thought, So she's trying to play a man's game? She ought to know, then, that it'll have to be played by men's rules.

He sneered at her as he rode back and swung down.

"There—that's better," Irene Snyder said with much satisfaction and actually smiled at him, the smile of a woman who knew her power and used it to get what she wanted.

The wagon boss groaned himself to his feet unaided, and wiped at his mouth, leaving a trail of red along one sleeve. He licked his bloodied lips and looked at Stony.

He said, "You caught me off-guard, the only time in my life that ever happened to Joe Cumberland. Now I'm going to beat hell out of you, you saddle-tramp bastard. Shuck that gunbelt!"

"It's not my fault you were stupid enough to be caught off-guard," Stony warned him coldly. "And you're not going to beat me up Because if you try it, Cumberland, I'll shoot your guts all the way through your backbone. And that goes for the little bastard son of a Mexican mother and a half-breed French-Indian father."

"Half-breed!" LeFeur screamed clawing at his sheathed pistol. "I kill you! By tam, I kill—"

"Cut it out, Mike," Irene Snyder interrupted coldly. "I'm beginning to believe that this man is as mean and tough as he looks. And you're too valuable to me to get yourself killed."

She looked at Stony, the smile on her face one of amused tolerance. "So you're old Poke's son? He used to brag a lot about you, like all the superannuated ones do. You come as a surprise. I had expected buck teeth."

"He was born with them," Stony told the woman coldly. "Just as you were born what you are."

"And what am I?" she challenged him, her eyes beginning to flash warningly.

"Something that me, or any other decent man, wouldn't want to be around a second time," he grunted.

"Boss," purred the little breed gunman, "pleeze, by tam, let me kill him!" His gun was out again.

THE Snyder woman, however, had turned to the wagon boss.

"Take him, Joe," she said quietly. "He must be made to realize where he is and who he's talking to."

Joe Cumberland's powerful hands unfastened the buckle of his cartridge belt, and one of the punchers reached out to take it. For one brief moment Stony weighed his chances against the breed gunman, shrugged, and unbuckled his own belt. He tossed it aside and sent the worn old stetson after it.

The rangy, big-shouldered wagon boss lost no time. He moved in close and began to circle and something about his big fists, the small scars around his eyebrows told Stony he was up against a rough-and-tumble barroom fighter. Then Cumberland lunged. He came in head-first in a billy-goat dive that caught Stony off-guard. Pain shot through his stomach as he was bowled over backward in the grass and he heard Cumberland's grunt of triumph.

"I've got you now, damn you!" he shouted and slashed a savage blow into Stony's mouth.

Then the palm of Stony's left hand was under Cumberland's chin, fingers over the face, and two fingers began to sink slowly and steadily deeper into the wagon boss's eyes.

"Damn!" he bellowed in fear and anguish and rolled free. But Stony's right leg lashed out in a hooking motion and the dull spur rowel cut a red welt across the man's big neck.

They came erect, circling again, and Stony thought, I'll have to watch out now. I've taught him how to do it, too.

He leaped in, their iron-hard bodies crashed together and strained grunts went out of both. Cumberland's huge arms suddenly locked around Stony's body, pinning his arms, and he felt a bear hug begin to press in his ribs, like a blacksmith's huge vise gripping a big piece of steel.

Pain was an agonizing hell in his spine now. He lifted his right foot and began to stamp down hard on Cumberland's bones beneath the thorn-scarred vamp of the man's boot. Cumberland groaned and moved his foot, and Stony's knee caught him in the groin. Only then did the powerful man give a yell of pain and let go. And, as he reeled back, Stony hit him with everything he had.

Again he felt his cut knuckles smash into teeth, but there was no fooling Cumberland a second time with a body-doubling blow and a knee beneath the chin. He lashed back savagely at Stony's right ear and fire and a ringing sound exploded inside Stony's skull. Vaguely he heard the men yelling gleefully, and he thought that somewhere in the distance he could hear the laughter of a woman. Cumberland hit him a slashing blow across one eyebrow, and blood began to flow.

He saw the red film first as it flowed into his left eye, then sight was gone.

He lunged at Cumberland and felt his bleeding, pain-filled knuckles smash into the cartilage of a big nose.

Then a blow came from somewhere, smashing him full in the face, and the world was blotted out as he went down in a limp heap. . . .

A stream of cold water from a bucket soaked his face and shirt front and brought him out of nothingness into a roaring void that was pain in both ears. He sat up weakly and spat out blood. One eye was still without vision and he managed to get out a handkerchief. While Ed Yerkes held the bucket, Stony dipped the handkerchief and washed at his eye until vision cleared.

He got to his feet and Ed Yerkes put out a hand to steady him. The ringing was still whistling through his ears, but only after Yerkes spoke in a low voice did Stony realize that he had been temporarily deafened in one ear from that terrible blow.

He saw Cumberland then. The wagon boss stood with chest heaving, leaning against a rear wheel of the big chuckwagon. The front of his blue shirt was soaked in blood. He put a finger to one nostril of his broken nose, blew out a stream of blood and wiped with a sleeve also turning red.

Yerkes was saying, "This all happened because of what you did for Jean. I'm obliged and sorry you got beat up."

Irene Snyder walked up to them, admiration plain in her eyes.

"I'm beginning to think, Stony Burns," she said frankly, "that your father wasn't bragging, after all. You are hardcase—all the way through. I like hardcase men who can take the kind of a beating Joe gave you."

Stony whirled and fired his .44

HE SAID through lips broken open and beginning to thicken, "We're one up and that makes us square." He looked at Yerkes. "Your wife said that they were planning to move into town soon. "Don't wait, Ed. Move them in right away."

"Why, Mr. Burns," Irene Snyder laughed, "Jeff is a gentleman always. That girl's in no danger from him."

"I know she isn't," Stony said, "because if I ever hear of him bothering her again I'll kill him on sight." And to Yerkes, "It's not that, Ed. It's much worse. It's the Comanches and Cheyennes up in the Nations country. The men in Washington have been breaking their oaths to the Indians again. Short rations, and with agents and traders stealing a part of even those. Some of the big cattle outfits are building fences in direct violation of promises not to. There's only one or two big herds of buffalo left now, at least big in the eyes of the Indians who once saw them by the hundreds of thousands where there are now but thousands. Those herds are grazing southward now through the Nations country and I happen to know from friends up that way that the Co-

manches are loading up with winter robes."

"Why?" asked the older man.

"What has that to do with it?" the Snyder woman put in.

Stony went on speaking earnestly to the father of Jean Yerkes. "They're going to break out and follow those herds south, Ed. Right through the Panhandle down to the buffalo wintering grounds on the Staked Plains. Right through here—killing every man, woman, and child, white or Mexican, they can pick up in the sweep."

"I see," Yerkes said lugubriously, and Stone heard the vague indecision of a man, slow-thinking and plodding, who had something to fight for but nothing left to fight with.

"Ed," Irene Snyder commanded, her eyes flashing again, "why didn't you tell me?"

"Because he didn't have nerve enough, because you and your way of life have crushed everything out of him," Stony said harshly.

"You will not move them to town, Ed, you understand?" Irene Snyder said flatly. "This ranch has been home to you since my father came back from the War Between the States."

"The Civil War," Stony couldn't help reminding her grimly.

"To those of you traitors who fought for the North, yes!" she snapped back. "Ed, you get packed, then get ready to move back to the ranch. Hurry!"

Ed said, "All right, Miss Snyder.

She said to Stony, "Burns, you owe me money I loaned to your father, and other money for his keep and burial."

"How much?" he asked in disgust and reached for a hip pocket.

She laughed then, jeering at him. She hadn't been used to having any man stand up to her. Stony knew he had stung her hard and that it rankled. She'd got the satisfaction of seeing him badly beaten up and now she was triyng to get back at him through his dead father.

"I loaned your father money and gave him credit in return for promised *work*," she said. "And I am not in the money-lending business, I assure you. I expect to get back the money I advanced for work, if not from the father, then from the son. Will you work for me and pay this debt like a man, Burns, or must I ask the boys to see that you do?"

He said quietly, "I'll pay you, Miss Snyder. We Burnses have a way of squaring up our debts."

The significance of his words apparently escaped her, for she laughed a surprisingly soft, rich laugh, and the hand she extended to him came as more of a surprise.

"Let's start off by being friends, Stony. I know they call me a hard, ruthless woman, but what would happen if I went soft? So I can't afford to. A woman in my position must either sink or keep swimming hard. It forces me to do things I'd rather not do— Does that beautiful black gelding you're riding lead?"

He said quietly, "I wouldn't be riding him if he didn't, ma'am."

"Good. Tie him to the back of the surrey and ride with me. Oh, I know you don't like me, and I'm not sure if I'm making a wise move in hiring you. But at lease when two people with a go-to-hell-the-rest-of-the-world attitude get together, their conversation shouldn't be boring."

STONY picked up his gun-belt and slung the worn .44 into place at his right hip. The hat he instinctively dusted before adjusting the peaked "Montana" crown and setting it carefully over his bruised forehead. He thought, She's had her way and now she's a different woman.

He tied the black to the back of the surrey, then went over to where Ed Yerkes was loading up the chuckwagon preparatory to striking.

"You will move Mrs. Yerkes and Jean into town right away, won't you, Ed?" he asked.

"Well—I don't know," Yerkes began hesitatantly and looked helplessly at

Irene Snyder, as if for an answer.

"Ed, you're working for me," she said sharply. "You'll do as I say if you expect to continue working for the Snyder Cattle Company. Even if what Stony says has some basis for worry, there still will be plenty of time. Your family belongs with you every moment while there is time. I know"—she spoke with a strange kind of bitterness—"because I haven't got one. There will be time to warn you if trouble breaks."

"There won't be any time," Stony said harshly. "That fight last year at the Washita between General Nelson Miles's troops and the Cheyennes and Comanches was just a warmup."

"How do *you* know?" she demanded.

"Because I was a scout for Miles," he snarled at her.

He walked over to where Jeff Holmes stood smoking a long black panatella cigar.

"Don't forget what I said," he growled at the ranch manager. "If I ever hear of you being up there at the line cabin again I'll blow your guts through your aristocratic backbone!"

He looked over at Irene Snyder in mild surprise. She was laughing heartily.

IV

THE surrey's bright black wheel spokes cut glittering circles against the sunlight as the slick span of dappled grays trotted away. Stony sat beside Irene Snyder with the lines in his hands, looking straight ahead.

She broke a short silence between them. "How did it come about, Stony, that you fought with the Yankees while your father fought beside Dad Snyder with the Confederates?"

He said, "I wasn't fighting for the North, Miss Snyder. I was fighing for what a great man believed in. His name was Abraham Lincoln."

"And you were an officer."

"I was pretty young to be a captain," he admitted. "Eighteen. From recruit to a commission in three battles in six weeks."

"What have you done since then, Stony?"

He shrugged. "Worked."

"All right, I won't pry further. I'm only sorry we met under such circumstances. But I can well remember that day in May, Sixty-one, fourteen years ago, when Dad Snyder and Poke Burns and others went away Dad had fought in the Mexican War, too, under General Kearney's command that took California. Then in Forty-six he was running pack trains from Missouri to Santa Fe over the old Santa Fe Trail—made a fortune at it. But he had to fight Kiowas and Comanches and Cheyennes and even the terrible Utes from up north. He shot it out with Mexican raiders and when Texas cutthroats moved in, he hung men he'd once called friends. But always he had a dream of cattle markets where *meat* could be sold as well as the tallow and hides. Men made fun of him, called him a fool when he bought cows by the hundreds and bought this six hundred and forty sections for pennies."

Stony was letting the team move along at a walk, the instinct of a cavalryman—walk, trot, gallop, rest ten minutes every hour.

"Anyhow," Irene Snyder went on as Stony flicked the span into a trot, "we moved from San Antonio to wait for him to come back from the War Between the States. It was four years before he did, and four years can do things to a woman like my mother. She wasn't bad. Stony. She was lonely and starved for affection. But it's a terrible thing, growing up from twelve to sixteen and seeing another man in the house with your mother, knowing what's going on while your father is away. It was heart-breaking when the baby came. And you can imagine the agony I felt that day, ten years ago, when I had to meet a ragged, bone-thin, bearded, war-weary colonel and tell him he didn't have a wife any more. He kept his own agony deep down inside him and brought me back here to

his thousands and thousands of cattle and the cattle of others roaming unbranded in the midst of the buffalo herds. He branded them with one hand and fought off Comanches and Cheyennes with the other. He ran down long-looping thieves, hanging those he could catch and shooting those he couldn't get his hands on. Men like you and Dad saw death and destruction during the War. I saw it afterward—swollen, bloated bodies swaying in the breeze from any limb that was handy. Two years after the War ended, he put nine big herds up the trail to Abilene. He was a big, jolly man on the surface, Stony, but the tragedy of my mother ate at his heart like an insidious disease, and one night two years ago a very tired old man simply went to sleep in his big bed and never woke up again."

Stony was seeing a new side of Irene Snyder's nature, hitherto unsuspected, though the picture she painted was without self-pity. It was plain that Colonel Snyder had built his world around her, hiding from his heartbreak, but Stony would see that what her mother had done also had gnawed at the heart of the woman who now sat beside him, the woman who had ordered him to be beaten unconscious and then laughed at him. A woman who, at twenty-four, had become the sole owner of one of the biggest cow outfits in the state of Texas.

SHE said, with an attempt at lightness which still held irony, "I don't see any tears of sympathy, Stony."

"It didn't happen only during the Civil War," he told her. "It began the first time men ever left their womenfolks to go to war. It's been going on ever since. It will go on in any future wars because nobody can change human nature. You can remember some family life. I never knew any. It cost my mother her life to bring me into the world, and I was raised by an aunt. My father carried sorrow inside of him, too, the main reason he preferred to stay with Colonel Snyder rather than live off his son."

"And you never married?"

"Just didn't seem to have time for it," he said. He was tired of talking. Tired of listening to her.

She said, "You mean you don't think you're fitted for it. What about me? Do you think I could ever be happy over a stove? Making beds and sweeping floors? Crooning over a crib?"

"You'll find out differently when the right man comes along," he said bluntly. "You're living in the past when you should be forgetting what happened twelve years ago—covering up with arrogance and harshness what you really feel when you can't sleep because of loneliness."

"Why—why *damn you*!"

She snatched the lines from his hands. The surrey jerked to an abrupt halt, and he felt the loose ends of the lines slashing him around the head and face.

"Get out!" she cried. "Get out, you—you impudent saddle tramp!"

He jumped over the wheel and she lashed at the team. Stony stood there and watched the surrey, with his horse galloping along behind, disappear over the top of a near-by knoll.

His swollen lips were a little grim as he set off on foot on the fifteen-mile walk to the headquarters of the great ranch, following the tracks of the survey.

And yet, he couldn't blame her too much. For in effect he had told her that she was something that he, or any other decent man, wouldn't want to be around.

The disease that had eaten away her father's heart was gnawing at hers, too, more than he had thought.

He was following a well-worn cow trail which could lead him to the water he needed, so wrapped up in his thoughts he was almost upon the big, rusty-backed rattlesnake before he heard its warning whirr. He leaped instinctively and his hand flashed to his hip. Smoke spurted, and he looked down at writhing, headless coils.

Damn, he thought disgustedly, I'm jumpy.

From behind came shrill yells, the

pound of hoofs, and a group of riders bore down upon him. Joe Cumberland pulled his horse down hard with its jaws spread wide from the pain of a cruel Spanish bit. His nose was swollen to almost twice normal size, and his lips were smashed. Beside him Jeff Holmes sat his own mount in silence, his chill eyes betraying his cold anger.

"He's been practicing, boys." The wagon boss grinned, looking at the still writhing coils of the big rattler. And to Stony, "You'll need it, mister. Because you ain't going to leave this place alive, even hiding behind a woman's skirts.—Come on, boys!"

They loped away and derisive laughter floated back as Stony plodded on. Half an hour later the big chuckwagon rolled up behind him and Ed Yerkes pulled to a halt. Stony mounted hub and tire rim and stepped over into the box. The wagon rolled on. Stony built a cigarette in moody silence and dropped the match, still burning, over the wheel. A mile away he looked back.

A plume of gray smoke already was boiling up into the sultry afternoon sky. THE first installment on his debt to Irene Snyder had been made.

When Ed Yerkes finally said, "He wanted to marry her, all right," Stony realized he hadn't even been listening to the cook.

"Huh?" he said.

"Jeff Holmes, Stony. He's rich—rich enough that once he learns the cow business he'll have a spread of his own. Jean could have the things I was never able to give her or her ma. When the years have beaten you down till you ain't got any fight left in you, a man has to think of them things."

"Your daughter seems like she can do some thinking of her own, Ed. And she didn't seem to be thinking of him, same being why I butted in. And your wife didn't seem to be sorry her home is in a two-room rock cabin instead of a big ranch house."

Two hours later he saw the hard-riding group of cowhands spur past a half mile away, followed by four wagons with gunnysacks piled high around sloshing water barrels. Stony grinned with his swollen lips.

ROCKY'S SIGHCOLOGY

TIME, that mellowing crucible of all things, has refined the gentle art of fisticuffs too. Gone are the days when men brutally battered one another for scores of rounds with bare fists; gone the grim, brutal days of Jack Johnson, Nelson, and Gans, and the rest. But out of the West came Rocky Stone, an ingenious, if not always successful fighter.

Rocky was matched with an ugly, tough fighter, and Rocky well knew it would take some "sighcology" of the better sort to defeat such an opponent. Rocky's fists were just not equal to it.

"Just before the fight," Rocky explained to his manager, "I pops two kernels of corn in me mouth. Then when I gets hit in the chops for the first time, I spits out the corn like they wuz me teeth, and says: 'What the hell is a couple of teeth? That just makes me madder. Let's get to some real fighting."

According to his plan, Rocky's opponent would then be unable to withstand the onslaught of Rocky's fists flung at him while he was recovering from the surprise.

That night the bell clanged for the first round, and Rocky rushed forth, being secretly pleased when he received a stiff jolt to his gapper on the first clash. Rocky spits, according to his plan, but out pops two real teeth instead of the corn.

Realizing he'd swallowed the corn, and those were actually teeth, Rocky took one look, then fainted dead away and was counted out.

—Bob and Jan Young

A slight breeze had swung in over the prairie and behind him the smoke of burning grass along a four-mile, flame-wrapped front roiled ominous gray clouds into a sullen sky. The late fall sun was still an hour high and Stony was beginning to feel the cold when at last Ed Yerkes dropped the huge wagon with its four-horse team down another of the many long slopes toward the ranch buildings at the headwaters of Hackberry Creek, one of many tributaries of the Salt Fork of the Brazos River.

"It's quite a place," Yerkes said, after a long silence. "Used to be a favorite fall camping ground for Comanche hunters before Dad Snyder had his headquarters here."

There appeared to be acres of pole corrals with roads and lanes running among them and the many sheds. Two hundred or more horses grazed farther south in the still lush but dry grass on the slopes; tired horses with weeks of strenuous roundup work now behind. A dozen or more cabins were scattered around, occupied, Stony presumed, by the married hands and their families. The ranch house was not built on the grand scale he had expected. It was of stone and log construction, low and sprawling, built by a man who had known winter storms and their terrible capacity to freeze and quickly kill anything that blocked the roar of their passage down across the plains country.

Ed Yerkes tooled the big wagon down a lane between two of the corrals and pulled up in front of a large building with a hub-high loading platform. He worked his way gruntingly over the wheel.

"This is the storeroom for supplies and such," he informed Stony. "I'll unload tomorrow."

They went to work at the trace chains, then drove the unhooked four to one of the corrals and unharnessed. The black gelding stood beneanth a big shed, head buried contentedly in an oats trough. It had been curried and brushed until it shone.

The two men walked to a box-shaped, two-story bunkhouse big enough to have been a hotel in a town. In the downstairs front part they entered were card tables, a large rack containing books, magazines from the East, stock raising perodicals, and newspapers, most of them all weeks, even months old. In the dining room to the right was a long, plain table and benches seating forty hungry men at a time, with a big kitchen in the rear. Stony caught a glimpse of a Negro cook and two Mexican women scurrying around two large stoves.

"We've got twenty rooms up stairs and down," Ed Yerkes said, "with men bunking in fifteen of 'em. Any of the others are your'n."

Stony said, "You staying tonight?"

Yerkes shook his head. "I been away from my folks too long already. Soon's I get cleaned up and change clothes I'll eat a bite and ride home. Want to see how the boys are making out with that prairie fire. If the wind shifts south we could get burned out here. I've seen fire do twenty miles an hour with the wind just right. Can't figure out how it got started." He shook his gray head.

"Might have been a small party of restless young bucks from up north sneaking through on a hunt or raiding spree."

"Could have been. Them devils sure like to set grass fires. Claim it makes it grow better next spring. Why, I remember two years ago when a young buck up that way shot some old chief or other and hid in a cave. When they tried to smoke him out the whole country got afire and swept down this way. Drove every damned panther, wild-cat, wolf and coyote and all the game right down on us. One of them panthers killed a milk-pen calf right in the lot there at the line cabin. I put a fifty caliber Sharps slug right 'tween his forelegs. We've had trouble with them big cats ever since."

Stony thought, Yes, I knew the chief and I know what happened to that young buck when they finally starved him out. I saw it.

V

GOING up the rough stairs and along the hallway, Stony glanced into the unlocked rooms. Neat beds with white sheets, the handiwork of a Mexican woman. In one of the empty rooms he found his saddle on the floor, horn down and with the damp blanket spread out over the unturned hull. On a bureau, in careful array ,was his shaving outfit and a few other personal belongings.

He was shaving off a four-day growth of black whiskers when a knock came on the door. When he opened it a Negro youth of about sixteen was standing there.

"Mistuh Stony? The Missus say she want to see you right away. Says hurry up because one of the riders done come from that fire on the prairie."

"Tell her my time doesn't start until tomorrow," Stony said. "Ask her what she's going to do about it."

The Negro youth shook his head dubiously. "All right, Mistuh Stony. That what you wants me to tell her, that's what I'm gonna say."

Stony went back to water basin and razor. He finished shaving, picked up scissors, and went to work on his mustache, trimming it short above his swollen lip. With the remainder of the hot water from a big wooden bucket he managed a bath of sorts and changed into clean work clothes. When he went downstairs Ed Yerkes, still unwashed, was eating hurriedly.

"Got to get out there with more barrels in a wagon," he grunted. "One of the hands just rode in. They've killed some steers and split 'em in half and are dragging 'em along the fire. But the wind won't die down for another hour and they got their hands full."

Thinking of Joe Cumberland out there, Stony felt an inner satisfaction.

Yerkes was gone, and Stony was rolling a cigarette when Irene Snyder strode into the room, cold anger in her eyes.

She snapped, "Burns, on this place tomorrow's one minute past midnight. At that time you'll be up and on your way to the line cabin twenty miles west of where the Yerkeses live. You'll patrol ten miles out each morning and afternoon to keep Snyder cattle on my range and to push back strays. Is that clear?"

"Sure," he said drily. "And she *is* beautiful, isn't she? Clean and wholesome. I reckon I don't blame you for keeping her up there away from the ranch after your father died. But Holmes didn't let distance make any difference."

He thought she was going to strike him. Then she was fighting to get control of herself.

She said, "There was no lightning, no campfires. If I ever have any proof of what I suspect about that fire raging out there over some of my best range, you won't leave this ranch alive!"

"That makes three of you going to pin my hide," he said and grinned at her. "You and Cumberland and the man who goes riding a couple times every week."

Wordlessly she turned on a boot heel and went out. Stony grinned again. He went upstairs and slept a few hours, and came back downstairs shortly after ten. He was deeply absorbed in *Harper's Weekly* when on a rumble of sound almost thirty men came streaming in.

They were a sorry-looking sight. Faces blistered, beet red or covered with smoke and soot, the men were almost staggering from exhaustion and hunger. Stony glanced up, then went on reading.

"You look damned comfortable," Cumberland snarled hunkering over the big pot-bellied stove, glowing red from a fresh feeding of mesquite wood.

Stony waited until they had all trooped in, bellowing for hot food in a hurry, then went upstairs to pack his belongings. No use to wait until midnight. Anyway, he preferred the most remote line rider's camp to this place he hated as much as he hated the woman who owned it.

When he rode away in the darkness, letting the black pick its way, it was

much colder than he had thought, and his brush jumper of blue ducking afforded little warmth. The wind, which had died down at dusk, when the men had been able finally to put out the raging fires, was rising again, bitingly chill. It was early for a storm, but he had a feeling that one was coming.

HE CAME at last to a blackened area where he and the gelding were shadows invisible forty yards away, and the odor of burned grass filled his nostrils. The black suddenly pricked up his ears. Stony heard snarling and rode forward as several coyotes ducked away and stood like blobs in the darkness, waiting for a chance at the steer that had been split lengthwise, skinned, and dragged along the line of fire.

Stony followed the blackened area for three miles to where the fire had been stopped at the edge of a wide gully. Night wind struck at him with renewed fury and he knew for certain that it presaged the first winter storm of many to come.

Sound came out of the night, unmistakably guttural, and he thought he heard a dog bark. Stony buck-jumped the black into a near-by arroyo and clamped a hand over its nose. Muffled-up figures rode by along the bank above, horses dragging travois loaded with rolled-up tepees and robed children, but there were no sounds from the young. Many times Stony had seen an Indian infant begin an outcry, only to have the mother gently pinch the tiny nostrils together and place another finger-tip across the mouth. He'd seen them being travoised across a stream, sitting up to their necks in water, with terror-stricken eyes watching the mother astride a pony and the father splashing alongside with guttural warnings and commands—but no outcry.

"It's started!" Stony muttered as the figures moved by, clearly outlined against the horizon. "Fifty or seventy-five riding by night for the Staked Plains to winter quarters. So Miles and Custer thought they whipped them at the Washita? They'll damned soon find out different as soon as the buffalo get this far south."

The traveling village faded away on the cold night plain, and Stony rode on. With the North Star as a guide he bowed his head to the rising wind. Hours later he struck a dry creek bed that looked familiar, and two miles farther on Ed Yerkes's cabin loomed up. Inside the house, a dog barked, the sound muffled by rock walls and icy wind. Stony unsaddled in the corral and, wrapped in his blanket, snuggled down in the feed crib to sleep until daylight.

The creak of the sagging feed crib door brought him awake, cold and stiff. Jean Yerkes stood in the opening, regarding him quizzically.

She said, "Why didn't you arouse us, Stony? You could have had my bunk in the kitchen."

He unwrapped himself and rose stiffly. "I didn't see Ed's horse in the corral. He was due back last night."

"So they're all finished with the round-up?"

"Yesterday."

She was looking at his puffed lips, the red-encrusted cut over one eye where it had broken open and bled during the night. "You better go wash up while I feed. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes."

The half-grown pup barked again, then began to run in joyous circles as Stony went to the kitchen. He was shivering with cold when he entered the warm kitchen where a bubbling coffee pot was on the stove. Mrs. Yerkes greeted him cheerily, and when Jean came in, the three of them sat down to eat. Stony told them of what had happened, glossing over the details of the fight. He said that because of the fire fighting Yerkes must have been too exhausted to ride home. Jean's eyes were on his battered face in a steady gaze as he told his own reason for returning.

She said, "You're sure this wasn't just a small band of Indian families who

couldn't take reservation life any more?"

"Jean, I come from that country," he said earnestly. "You have to live among those people, know them, their language and their customs and beliefs to understand what they plan to do. They don't believe the buffalo come south and winter on the Staked Plains to drop their calves, then graze northward again. They believe the buffalo winter in a big underground land and come forth each year with their new-born. It's a big range down there, with more buffalo and other game than was ever seen on the plains even in the early days.

"Two years ago, white men who leased Indian grazing lands began to build fences. It caused fights and military patrol action, and a few Indians and cowpunchers got killed. Older chiefs began urging their people to go hunt for the hole where the buffalo lived and go down into it. Let the white men have their lands. That was what caused the big fire two years ago when all the wild animals were driven down into this country. One of the young bucks who didn't believe shot one of the old chiefs and fled into a cave. When they tried to smoke him out, it fired the whole country. But the murmurs have grown, and something tells me this is a final desperate effort on the part of the Comanches against the white man."

STONY wiped his puffed lips with the napkin folded beside his plate. He said, "I wouldn't want to come by here, Mrs. Yerkes, and find you two in this cabin after a war party had passed—all because of a harsh, embittered woman who demands that you remain. If you'll say the word, I'll hit for town and bring back a wagon for your goods."

Ed Yerkes's wife, however, shook her head. Loyalty to her husband came before anything else with her. "I've been through Indian troubles with Ed before, Stony. I worked all the time he was away at war to take care of Jean. If his job with Irene Snyder means we stay here, then we stay."

A sudden gust of wind struck the house, swirling around the chimney. Smoke and ashes puffed out of the stove and settled on the tablecloth.

Stony rose and said, "Tell Ed I'll be over in a few days to see about an extra horse or two."

"Jeff probably will send you up a couple by the supply wagon next week," Mrs. Yerkes said.

She went into the next room and came back with a heavy windbreaker with a collar of sheepskin and held it out for him to slip into. The wind struck again as he opened the door, slashing bitingly as he and Jean bent before it and walked to the corral.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that we're going to be in for it this winter."

"The Indians knew," Stony replied.

"Indians?"

"About the weather, Jean, and they've chosen their own time. When it's bitter cold the troops can't operate against them effectively down on the Staked Plains. Don't ask me how they forecast, but they always know. I once asked a squaw how she'd known about a night hailstorm that came up out of a clear sky within two hours. She said it was the flowers looking queer at sundown. Another said a coyote told her. Call it what you want to, they know what this winter will be. Bad, a very bad one. And that's another good reason why you'd better persuade your mother to move into town."

In the shed, built of cedar poles and with a sod roof for the protection of the horses against northers, Stony saddled the black. He led the animal toward the water barrel well, with Jean beside him.

"You keep talking about the Indians and the Nations country," she remarked. "Just what did you do up there?"

"Run cattle," he said. "On range leased from the Indians."

"So Poke was telling the truth," she murmured. "Nobody believed his bragging—though it only the ramblings of a

crippled old man."

He grinned at her wryly. As he swung into leather, he said, "I'll bring the coat back when this storm blows over. So long, Jean. Don't forget what I said about moving to town."

He rode westward, following a well-worn trail that line riders had ridden for many winters. The wind was steadily increasing and dark clouds formed an ominous weather front on the horizon to the north. The buffalo soon would be coming, on their passage across the Panhandle.

After hours of riding, he saw the cabin in the distance, much like the one he had left on a higher point of ground. He rode up and sat there a few moments, looking at the blackened embers of the corral and shed, sticking up from the ground like the drawn fingers of a hand twisted in agony. The kitchen door had been cut from its rawhide hinges and apparently used for wood to build fires where now there were only ashes.

Stony swung down and went inside. Nothing but destruction met his eyes. The kitchen stove had been smashed to bits, bunks torn down from the rock walls. Offal was on the floors and an animal odor all over the place.

VI

BONES and pieces of brown hide and a cow head, gnawed to a skeleton by coyotes and other carnivores, were scattered around outside the cabin. And when Stony went out again, he was aware of another offensive odor. He followed it down behind the blackened remains of the shed.

It had been a small war party that had been here, and the victim appeared to have been an elderly saddle tramp who likely had been looking for a winter job. He had been bound with wire corral lashings to the cedar upright forming the back wall of the shed. But the timbers and boards hadn't burned all the way to the ground—just enough so that he had been partly roasted alive and then left with his scalped head smashed open by blows from a pole-ax. The oat sacks had been slashed open but the grain had not been burned.

About three days ago, Stony guessed. And they had come within twenty miles of the Yerkes line cabin!

He picked up the ax, went out, and began chopping at the ground. The wind was increasing and that weather front was growing blacker by the hour. But he managed to bury the unknown man within feet of where he had suffered so agonizingly from fire and scalp knife.

This first norther looked like a bad one, and he had to have food, for the war party had consumed or destroyed the courtesy food supplies that even such a woman as Irene Snyder left in line camps for the hungry and lost. He shot a steer, skinned it with the knife from from his boot, and carried a quarter of meat and the liver to the cabin. With square, hand-fashioned nails from the partly consumed shed, he covered the smashed windows with rawhide and left a flap for the doorway.

By the time night came down and the first hailstones struck, Stony sat before a makeshift fireplace in a room almost filled with wood, and ate broiled meat without salt. He thought of Irene Snyder down in the big ranch house, and cold hatred came up inside him.

The storm struck with full fury that night and on others that followed. Stony remained in the cabin, except for trips out to the makeshift shelter he had rigged for the black gelding. His bed in the cabin was a layer of oats with a sheepskin windbreaker and a blanket for covering. His light was furnished by strings of gunnysack ravelings soaked in steer tallow. His food was broiled meat and a tasteless mush made from hulled oats, and he peeled brown cedar bark from the wood to smoke—something half the youngsters in Texas had started out on.

On the fourth night he heard a crash in the ruins of the corral and loud sniffs and grunts around the cabin. The van-

guard of the buffalo had arrived, drifting south before the storm.

Stony ate buffalo tongue for breakfast and went out into air that was so clear and icy it cut like a hot flash at his nose. Around him lay a sea of hail, frozen into a two-inch thickness of solid ice.

He saddled up and rode a few slow, careful miles with boots wrapped in gunnysacking, his cowman's eye noting the miserable critters humped up in draws, hungry and thin, some wearing the Rafter R brand on their lean left hips. His work had been cut out for him.

The idea of leaving here, however, had never occurred to him. He had a score to settle with Irene Snyder, and no hardship was too great to drive him away before that was accomplished.

He was not so worried about Jean and her mother now. The main body of Comanches undoubtedly had presaged the coming of the storm and had remained up north. And even if fair weather followed the early blizzard, as was most likely, few, with the exception of over-eager, restless young bucks in small parties would leave—bucks such as those who had caught that unknown man now in an ice-covered grave.

Young Tony Williams, the freckled-faced waddy Stony had met on the range the day he had been on his way to the Snyder ranch, put in appearance two days later, driving ahead of him a loaded pack-horse and leading four others. He hadn't left, for his eight months' wages had gone into the pockets of a tinhorn gambler within hours after he hit town. Williams had been broke and happy again, and now Irene Snyder had sent up lumber, poles, and window frames to repair the line camp, after a rider passing by had seen the place and reported to her.

STONY stood there and read the note she'd sent, his lips twisted in amused tolerance. She had written:

My dear Stony: I have been told what happened before the storm and how hard you rode afterward. In my interests. Would you hate me less if I offer you an humble apology? Would you allow me the privilege of putting up a stone at the grave of a loyal man who fought side by side with Dad Snyder before, during, and after the war? Irene.

"No," Stony Burns grunted.

"Huh?" asked Tony, straightening from a kit of tools.

Then the postscript:

As soon as the cabin and shed are repaired I want you here for more important work. War parties are reported out and there is talk of military action by the cavalry.

Not a word about Jean or her mother! Stony burned the note and ground it into the dirt with a boot heel.

During the two months of good late fall and early winter weather that followed, Stony and Williams rode long, hard hours each day.

Then the buffalo began to drift through, shaggy beasts moving across the open range in black, unstoppable masses. Not the hordes of a few years ago but in sufficient numbers to cause angry cursing by owners of good winter grass; enough for the Comanches to be willing to follow in a final, desperate attempt to find that hole in the ground the old chiefs believed existed.

Stony was working to round up about forty head of Rafter R strays one afternoon when he heard shots. He saw a man on a running horse, another rider loping some distance behind, and a wagon further out on the plain. He loped over and pulled up as Ed Yerkes finished cutting the throat of a buffalo yearling to bleed her. Jean rode over and leaned from the saddle to extend a hand, man-fashion.

"We've been hoping you'd come see us," she said simply. "I've been worried, even though Tony has stopped by to keep us informed."

He murmured, "So that accounts for the sort of dazed look he has every time he comes back from—"

"Stony Burns," she cut in indignant-

ly, "stop it."

He saw her flush, and his face sobered. He asked quietly, "Has Holmes come back again?"

"Of course not," she answered quickly.

Ed Yerkes, astraddle of the heifer yearling, straightened with the bloody knife in his hand. He said, "She's lying, Burns. He came right back after the storm, worried about us enough to ride up."

"He—he—" Jean began to stammer confusedly.

"He asked her to marry him, and she turned him down cold," Yerkes said harshly, and Stony could sense the man's disappointment. "He left boiling mad, and I've been expecting to get fired any day since."

"I'm sorry you haven't been," Stony said just as harshly. "This weather can't hold, and when it breaks again, these prairies will be swarming with Comanches. Ed, you damned fool, what do I have to do to make you get Jean and her mother to town until spring?"

Yerkes stepped over the buffalo carcass and looked up at Stony while something of a spirit he once had possessed flamed briefly in his eyes. "I was a friend of your father, Burns, but his son doesn't tell me how to run my family. You just 'tend to your business and I'll 'tend to mine, mister."

It was blunt dismissal. Yerkes again stepped across the buffalo carcass and yanked savagely at a foreleg.

Stony said softly, "I reckon I'll be riding to the ranch."

"He's not there," Jean said quickly. "He's on business up north somewhere. There's no use your going there to look for him."

He reined the head of his horse around and trotted away. He drove the Rafter R stuff back onto its own range. When he returned to the line cabin, the wind was up again and although the clouds were now but a faint haze, he had lived too long in the plains country not to know the signs. Another storm was on the way.

AT NOON the next day when he rode in from a short patrol to cook dinner in the cabin, he found Irene Snyder standing in the kitchen doorway.

Stony's lips tightened in a thin line of exasperation as he rode up to the small corral. He ignored her friendly wave, his eyes boring coldly into those of Joe Cumberland, bitting up two harnessed mules to hook up to the light spring wagon at one side of the shed. Neither man spoke as Stony loosed the cinch a few notches and removed the bridle. Only light scars on the faces of the two men remained as evidence of the fight that had been ordered by that woman in a white wool dress over in the kitchen.

After Stony had put the nose bag of oats on the gelding he asked Joe Cumberland, "Where's Holmes? I warned him not to go back to the Yerkes cabin. He went back."

"It's none of your damned business where he is," snapped the wagon boss. "And if you've got any sense you'll pull out of here fast. Him and me did a little warning on our own."

He obviously was in a surly mood. He was yanking savagely at the mules to connect up the lines.

"So I remember, and that was a mistake, Cumberland." Stony dropped his hand to his right hip. "It has to be settled between us some time, and now is as good as any."

He was in a half crouch when Irene Snyder's screamed command came. And in the same moment, some atavistic instinct caused both men to forget their guns. They leaped simultaneously. Stony slashed a savage blow into Joe Cumberland's face before the wagon boss could get his dive started. They stumbled and went down, clawing and slugging, rolling over and over in the small corral. Stony caught a brief flash of white-clad legs directly above his face as Irene fought to part them.

"Stop it!" she commanded angrily. "Stop it, I tell you!"

She got Stony around the neck with

both arms and he felt the roundness of her breasts sink into his shoulder as she pulled him from atop the cursing wagon boss. As they came erect and Irene still clung for a moment before he shrugged her away. He picked up his .44 in silence, blew dust from around the cylinder, then sheathed it, his lips a grim line.

"Joe, I warned you there must be no fight here," Irene said angrily.

"I didn't want one," he grumbled. "You said make friends with him. I was willing, but he wouldn't have it that way."

She turned to Stony, her eyes friendly and earnest. She laid a hand on his right arm. "Stony, you belong on this ranch even if you did ignore my note asking you to come to headquarters. Joe is not your enemy, and I'm trying to make up for the suffering I caused you. Will you believe that and shake hands with him?"

"No," he grunted shortly. "And he'd better get you in that wagon and roll out of here. You've no business up here in the first place."

"Haven't I?" she challenged. "I own this place, remember?"

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the time of the year and that horizon out there to the north. I'm talking about Comanches coming down through the Panhandle from the Nations country. Have you ever seen a man half roasted alive, then scalped while he was still conscious? Have you ever seen the expression on the face of a dead man like I saw on the one who was still tied to the back of the shed there the first day I got here? Cumberland, you and Ed Yerkes are the two biggest damned fools in the whole plains country! Get her in that wagon as fast as you can and head for the Yerkes' cabin! Take all the guns you two men can find and hope and pray to God that you make it back to safety."

"You'll go with us?" Irene asked.

"I know those Indians," he said harshly. "I've lived among them for years. They're my friends."

"Then of course there is no danger, is there?"

"I said *I'm* their friend," he reminded her sharply.

She looked at Cumberland. "You'd better get going to the Yerkes line cabin with their supplies, Joe. No reason why the mules can't make it there and back by eight or nine tonight. I'm afraid, Stony, you'll have to put up with us tonight. We'll all go back in the morning."

VII

CUMBERLAND drove the mules out through the gate and to the wagon tongue, again jerking savagely at the lines to make one step over into place. The thought came to Stony in a flash that the man hated him for other reasons now. Joe Cumberland was in love with his boss, and jealousy was slashing him like the keen blade of a hit knife. With the mules hooked up, Cumberland drove away at a fast trot without a backward glance.

Irene and Stony went to the kitchen, closed the new, raw pine door against the biting cold. The kitchen was warm and filled with the tantalizing smell of good cooking.

She said, "Wash up, Stony. I've been waiting to eat with you. I've wanted for a long time to have a good talk with you."

As he washed up outside the wind bit icily through the water on his face. That wind was rising fast, and the horizon to the north was darkening.

An hour or more dragged on while Irene talked and he answered her questions, mostly in monosyllables. Finally he went out and unsaddled his horse, noting how the animal's long tail whipped in the gusts roiling around the shed. And by four o'clock that afternoon he knew that he and Irene Snyder would have to share the cabin alone that night. Joe Cumberland wouldn't be fool enough to risk his life in a snowstorm where soon it would be impossible to see a hundred yards ahead.

At dark the blizzard began to strike with the first hard, body-numbing blows

It roared around the cabin and snow hissed past almost aslant, beating against the walls and roof like fine birdshot. Stony sat there feeling that he ought to leave, yet knowing it might cost him his life to try.

Tony Williams was overdue. Unless he had wisely headed for the Yerkes place it would be a matter of waiting, then beginning a search that could have but one tragic climax.

Irene Snyder broke a long silence between them as she finished washing the supper dishes in the snugness of the warm cabin. She looked young and girlish in her white dress, despite wearing boots, more feminine than Stony ever could have thought possible. The kerosene lamps reflected lights from her russet hair, and her bosom beneath the dress was round and firm. She stirred the blood in him, not because she was a cattle queen but because she was a lovely woman, and he was a man who had lived too long alone and away from beautiful women.

Her thoughts must have been in harmony with his own for when she spoke her smile was gentle though slightly quizzical. She said, "Stop worring about young Williams. He was born in this country and he's been riding Snyder horses as a full hand since he was fifteen, five years now. He's stormwise and can take care of himself."

"I know," he said.

"So it's not the plight of a cowpuncher out in a storm that has you worried, Stony? Then what is it?"

He shrugged, but did not tell her that he was remembering how, just fifteen months before, on the twelfth of September 1874, a small troop of soldiers on patrol in the Nations country had been surprised by a hundred and twenty-five Kiowas and bitter young Comanche bucks off the reservation and surrounded on the Washita. The soldiers had fought it out against such oods until, with ammunition almost gone, they'd finally broken free. The raiders had picked up more bucks, and three hundred of them had slashed in on the small command of Captain Wyllys Lyman who, with his empty pack train, was returning to Camp Supply. Stony, who was with the train, had broken through the ring in the night, had lost his horse because of a broken leg after a few miles, but had walked and trotted day and night to the Nations country for help.

That had been during the summer and the work of a mere minority of angry bucks who defied reservation authorities. Now it was winter, the buffalo had come and passed by, and the old chief had been talking. That hole in the ground where the big shaggy beasts always came out of in the spring with their new calves.

STONY roused himself to answer Irene. "I haven't forgotten you refused to allow Jean and her mother to move to safety," he said. "If anything happens to them, I'll always hold you and Ed Yerkes to blame."

"There's a possibility you've been so close to those Indians you've lost perspective, Stony. Look what happened twice on the Washita last year when the renegades were caught and whittled down. Look what happened a few weeks later when General Mackenzie caught them in the Tule Cañon on the Blanco tributary near the Red River. Nothing will happen to the girl I'm beginning to think has been disturbing your thoughts so—"

Before she could finish what she meant to say he saw the doorknob begin to turn slowly. He whirled and snatched the .44 from its sheath on the back of his chair.

"Douse that kitchen light!" he roared and whirled again as the high window in the back wall crashed in.

He caught a brief glimpse of a long-bladed, thin-edged hatchet with a handle decorated with beaded buckskin and feathers. The hand and arm back of it were in buckskin and the face, painted and ghastly outside the window, was almost hidden by a buffalo robe.

Stony's .44 exploded and the face dis-

appeared as he blew out the lamp on the table. The door already was barred, since each night for weeks he had seen to that at dark in case something like this should happen. Somebody outside was tugging hard at it, then another hatchet drove a deep split through an inch of soft pine lumber.

Stony shot twice through the door and heard a yell, and above the roar of the storm chattering cries and snarlings. In the cabin Stony felt Irene close to him, handing him the pump-action Colt .44 repeater.

"Don't be scared," he said, trying to fumble open the loading gate of the six-shooter to reload. "It's probably the same party of young bucks who came through here in the fall. Just a few likely —who can be handled."

"But they could have shot you through the window!" she said and he felt her shudder. He knew what she was thinking of that old saddle tramp.

He said drily, "That's not their way of doing business, Irene. No young buck can marry until he's brought in a scalp to prove he's a fighter and fit to propagate more fighters. Forced to stay on their own lands makes it pretty hard for them to get wives. Just killing a man some easy way isn't enough. The harder and more dangerous it is to take a scalp —hand to hand if possible—the better choice they get, often the daughter of a sub-chief. No, they didn't want to fire through the window."

To his astonishment she laughed. "So they're lonely, too? It's a world much alike in many ways."

He shrugged. "Scared?" he asked her.

"No," she said quite calmly, "not now. Shaken, of course, but not scared. Not with you here, Stony."

"The Yerkeses," he said. "I wished to God I had some way of knowing!"

A shrill yell spewed through the window again and more glass crashed. Stony fired once then stepped closer and shot again. More hatchet blows crashed into the soft pine of the door, and he was thankful that it was not hinged with rawhide but with iron hinges, make by a good ranch blacksmith.

He heard the slow, spaced booming of the .44 pump action Colt repeating rifle and realized that this woman here he suddenly didn't hate so much any more was not an arrogant cattle queen now, but old Colonel Snyder's daughter calmly shooting through the splintered wood at waist-high level.

In the swirling snow outside guns began to boom and lead poured into the room. It struck the opposite walls, ricocheted and ricocheted again, and a flattened piece of lead tore a jagged slit three inches long in the stove pipe. The place had become a death trap.

"Down on the floor," he yelled at her. "Flat!"

"Cartridges, Stony. The rifle is empty."

"On the shelf by the stove. I'll get them."

In the white outdoors a figure muffled in a buffalo robe dashed past. Stony shot only once as more lead drummed through from the rifles of the howling screeching pack. He crawled back with two boxes, broke them open, and dumped a hundred rounds of .44 caliber ammunition on the lower bunk. Even in the heat of attack a swift thought sped through his mind that if it hadn't been for this Comanche war party, he wouldn't have slept alone in that bunk this night.

HE HATED her and she was going to pay for the beating he'd taken from Joe Cumberland. But hatred would not have kept him from taking her in a moment of loneliness and hunger, then sneering at her afterward. She was a woman, but she had elected to play a man's game. She would have to play it by a man's rules.

The wind was rising to a new crescendo, screaming now, and Stony, risking a look through the broken window, saw nothing but clouds of white snow swirling into nothingness. The firing and yelling had ceased as suddenly as they had begun. He went back and sat

down beside Irene on the bunk, and because the broken panes let the cold into the room, she shivered and snuggled against him. It sent fire through him, fanning to a blaze the flame that had been kindled when he had seen her here in the cabin at noon.

He said, "They're probably bunched up out at the shed and feed crib with the horses. Maybe doing a little chanting over their dead. They know they've got plenty of time. They knew this storm was coming, one of the worst in years. I don't know how they knew, but unless I miss my guess, nothing will move on the plains for days. So they're safe as long as this weather holds."

"Stony," she asked in a low voice, "what—would they do with me if they killed you and broke in here?"

He shrugged in the cold darkness. "Hard to guess, Irene. The Comanches haven't forgotten the bitter lesson they learned when they killed Mr. and Mrs. Germaine and took their five young daughters captive. Three of them were old enough to have been—well, taken. General Miles got back the two younger ones first, then smashed in and got the three others. He lined up every buck in camp and had the three girls point out those who had killed their parents and mistreated them. Miles shot everyone of them."

"But did they—"

"The records of Miles's command at his headquarters at Fort Leavenworth say positively not."

"There won't be any records for me," she said firmly. "If it happens I'll use a gun on myself."

"Listen!" he whispered and rose to his feet.

He looked upward in the darkness to where two feet of sod covered the boards and poles that were the ceiling. They were vibrating and a trickle of dirt fell through a crack to the floor. Suddenly the room began to fill with smoke.

Stony moved forward to the stove pipe and looked up. He took careful aim and drove three slanting shots upward. A muffled yell cut through the howl of the storm and he heard a soft thud outside. He'd shot a buck off the roof but the damage had already been done. A heavy buffalo robe had been wrapped over the top of the pipe and the stove was now useless.

"Get into the bunk and wrap up in blankets," he told Irene. "It's going to be a long, cold night."

VIII

IT WAS a long night, and the cold of the storm reached into the cabin with icy fingers. When it became unbearable Stony crawled in beside Irene and they took turns dozinz until daylight.

At daylight, in weather now below zero, Stony beat off another attack. He heard the shrill, almost human scream of a horse and knew that an animal had gone down with its throat cut, to furnish warm food, and he hoped that it hadn't been his black gelding. Holding the .44, he crept along the walls, peering out aslant, and out of range of gunfire. But the window was at the back and he could see nothing.

As he turned back he saw Irene beckoning to him. When he came over to her, she said, "You didn't know Dad Snyder, Stony. The man who fought all tribes of Indians, even before the Mexican War! He knew what he was doing when he built these line cabins."

She pointed to a round patch in the wall that Stony had never noticed. It was dried mud, not stone. With a kitchen knife she began to dig at it. As the clay fell away a hole six inches in diameter that tapered to an opening in the outer wall large enough only to insert a rifle barrel through was revealed.

Stony bent and squinted. The blizzard was still raging, its breath a thirty-mile-an-hour wind that would leave a trail of dead and half frozen cattle in its wake. But he could see raiders now, muffled in robes and blankets, crowded around small fires beneath the shed. About forty of them, he guessed. On the ground

near them lay the carcass of a horse. A few Indian ponies were humped up in the cold, something almost stolid in the manner they accepted what they had experienced in previous winters. They undoubtedly were hungry, but true Indian ponies would not touch oats. Indian horses wouldn't eat corn, either, so often what was taken in a raid was strewn on the ice of a frozen stream for easier passage across.

Stony handed the six-shooter to Irene and picked up the pump-action .44 Colt repeating rifle. "Watch that window at my back," he ordered her.

He lined the sights through the porthole and rapid explosions filled the room. Crash after crash, every shot counting. Comanches came boiling out like black hornets aroused from winter shelter while Stony desperately thumbed more cartridges into the magazine. He caught a brief glimpse of sprawled figures in the snow and saw another raider trying to crawl away.

A barrage of lead streamed through the cabin door which, already splintered, was being sieved. He grabbed Irene and both dropped flat on the cold stone floor and rolled under the bunk. He grabbed the six-shooter again and when Comanches came screeching at the window, he shot three before the others fell back.

Stony, with Irene Snyder fighting beside him, stood off four more attacks that day in the besieged cabin. The sky had cleared of snow enough that the lot and shed no longer were tenable for the war party. A few Indians were barricaded behind it, taking the full blast of the wind until human endurance, even that of an Indian inured to such vicissitudes, could take no more. The entire war party fled to the protection of a creek bank two hundred yards away, where they built fires of cedar and cottonwood. Stony, fearing a lurking sharpshooter, made no effort to climb up and remove the buffalo robe over the stovepipe.

He built an open fire on the floor under the smashed window and let the smoke

GOLD RUSH: A California TALL Tale!

WHILE my Army group was waiting in California to be sent overseas during World War II, I got leave one day to go fishing with a kindly old gentleman I had met.

We were wading and casting in a sand-bottomed stream when I asked him, "Uncle Ed, is there any gold in these branches?"

He lobbed his lure into a deep pool some feet away. Then he said, " 'Spec there's a little bit—but nowhere around what there was in the old days.

"Why, back then," he continued, "this place was full of it. A fellow came up here to fish a couple of days, and to keep his minnows alive overnight, he put 'em in a wire basket an' staked 'em out in one of these streams."

Uncle Ed pulled in his lure, inspected it, and then let it drift in the fast current.

"What's the connection?" I asked.

"Next morning," my old friend went on as if he hadn't heard the question, "that basket was gold-plated and the minnows had turned into goldfish."

—Jack Kytle

be sucked out by the slashing wind. While he stood guard with a gun Irene calmly prepared a warm meal.

As they ate in darkness, after putting out the fire, the storm renewed its devilish fury. Their wood was getting low and the water was almost gone.

When a new howling broke out near the shed, Irene started, but Stony leaped to his feet, tying his bandanna around his ears. He'd heard a sound he recognized—that of a horse in terror.

A PACK of big wolves, sometimes called lobos or known on the plains is timber wolves, had smelled the blood of the dead horse and preferred it to a live cow.

"Keep the rifle handy," Stony ordered Irene. "And bar the door when I go out."

"No, Stony," she implored him. "You'll never get back alive!"

"Those bucks are not out there," he told her. "Even a half-frozen, hungry wolf wouldn't come right into the corral with them. And the coyotes—hear them? Sitting around howling their disappointment and impatience for the big fellows to finish eating so they can get the scraps."

He could hear the frantic lunging and kicking of tied animals, and knew that one of the big devils would soon lunge in and snap a hamstring. He jerked the door open and stepped into wind-driven snow. He bent to the wind and circled the cabin, but found nothing, for all bodies had been carried away. The howls of the coyotes became louder as he felt his way toward the lot. As he reached the open gate in the fence of widely spaced poles, a pair of eyes glowed brightly with a snarl back of them. Stony shot the wolf as it leaped. He wounded a second which tried to dash away, but the smell of fresh, warm blood aroused the savage instinct of the rest of the pack.

The wounded wolf went down under a flurry of slashing teeth, and the coyotes faded farther back to continue their mournful howls. The black gelding and two other horses were still beneath the shed, tied hard and fast by the war party, probably intended as fresh meat during the siege of the cabin.

Stony said to the terrified animals, "Easy, boys. I know what you've been through."

As a cowman he knew how terrified such animals became at the smell of an Indian. Likewise, cow ponies, gentle with Indian children astride their bare backs, would buck and bawl in terror of a strange-smelling white rider wearing sharp spurs.

Stony freed young Williams' extra mount and watched it lunge away with its rumps to the storm, hunting in the gullies for protection among humped-up, half-frozen cattle.

The wolves were still snarling over their kill. Stony wasn't worried about them now. With full bellies they'd slink away within minutes. His problem was the two horses. It was out of the question to take them inside the cabin. Although the Indians now were conserving their ammunition, they would not go away without making more attacks on the cabin. And two wounded, kicking horses could be as dangerous as the war party.

Turning them loose was out of the question, too. That would leave him and Irene stranded in case they should get a chance to get away. Stony tied them more securely, left a big feed of oats, and headed back to the cabin, bending his back to the wind.

Five figures, warm and comfortable in frozen snow, were humped in front of buffalo robes covered with a half inch of the barred doorway. The Comanches had found the cabin by an instinct not possessed by any white man, sneaking up with arms filled with dry cedar branches and one with a pile of glowing coals in his ash-filled palms. Only luck had saved that already splintered door of soft, dry pine from caving in like paper before the roaring wind-fanned flames.

Stony reached for the big knife in his boot, shifted it to his left hand, and lunged. The .44 in his right hand crashed

three times, short spurts of fire tonguing out into white backs. He shot a fourth buck but never knew how the fifth one sprang, catlike, free of his robe in mid-air and closed in on him with a hatchet.

Stony's pistol exploded, and he heard a spine-chilling cry, more of pain than anger, and his left elbow caught the blow of the hatchet handle as he felt his own blade cut through flesh and rasp on bone. Stony leaped clear just as the warrior fell.

"Open up, Irene!" he roared through the howl of the wind. "It's all over."

"Are you all right?" she cried as the door swung aside.

"Just scared as all hell!"

SHE stood there with the rifle ready, white-faced but determined, with the driving snow cutting at her viciously. On the ground a body stirred and Stony raised the empty six-shooter high, for a bone-crushing blow, then suddenly reached down, got hold of a bucksin-covered wrist, and dragged a bleeding young buck into the cabin.

He risked lighting a lamp, since the smashed window was covered with a doubled blanket to keep out the cold. His left arm from the elbow down felt numb from the blow of the hatchet handle which still dangled by a thong from the Indian's wrist.

Black eyes stared up at him impassively, with the certain expectation of sudden death. Blood already was seeping around the buckskin over the buck's flat belly and his left shoulder had been ripped open from the slash of Stony's knife.

"Why did you do it?" Stony asked, and called the Comanche by name. "Have I not always been a friend of your people? Hasn't He-Who-Buys-Grass always paid the Indians much money? Did I not leave word with all of you that I would be in this country and was still a friend even to the young fighters who disobey the White Soldiers?"

"White man came to us," muttered the buck, hands clasped over his bloody stomach but no sign of pain on his features. "Give much guns and cartridges to come here when storm gives. Say kill white man in this place. We come."

"What white man sent you?"

"Big medicine. Him Home."

It didn't dawn upon Stony for a moment. Not until the doomed buck added some more words in his own language, and then Stony forgot him and wheeled on Irene, his eyes blazing.

"Holmes," he said bitterly. "He said he'd get me and this was his way of doing it. I threw him out of Yerkes's cabin and he and Cumberland swore I'd never leave this place alive—and so did you!"

"Holmes!" she gasped. "He wouldn't have! And I—I was only angry, Stony. I didn't mean it."

"I burned your grass last fall," he snarled at her. "Yes, I did! I set it on fire with a lighted match from the chuck-wagon, hoping and praying that it would burn off every foot of your six hundred and forty sections. And now Holmes! Jean said he was up north on business, but I still should have followed and killed him after he went back to see her again. But no, I was too intent upon squaring up a debt to you."

"Stony," she began faintly and moved closer to him, her eyes pleading, "I—I have a confession to make. Your father never owed me money."

"I know that," he sneered at her.

"You—knew?"

"He never borrowed a cent in his life. Not even from your father."

"Then—why did you stay?"

"To square up with you for a beating at the hands of the man who loves you—Joe Cumberland. I said we Burnses always square up our debts. I'm going to kill Cumberland as next installment."

He had been reloading his old .44. He swung shut the loading gate, grasped the Indian by a wrist and dragged him out into the howl of the storm. Irene placed both hands over her ears.

That gesture, and the storm muffled a lone shot that seemed to echo eerily in the cabin. . . .

During the early morning hours of the

following day the exhausted storm gave a final death gasp and succumbed. Daylight showed a clear sky above a land of white. Through one of the port-holes in the cabin Stony surveyed the horizon and looked toward the creek where the war party had taken shelter. No smoke, not a pony in sight.

Stony unbarred the splintered door, took a cautious glance outside then stepped through. No sign of five frozen bodies. Nothing but a buffalo robe with patches of red-colored ice on it to tell the story of its owner's fate.

He went back and got a chair, swinging from it to the roof to remove the robe wrapped over the stove pipe. Irene began to bulid a fire as he came back, picked up the empty water pail and pole-ax. There was something different in her this morning. He had felt it during the night when, hating her, he'd had to lie beside her to keep from freezing. She was almost humble.

HE WENT first to the creek, located the barrel well, and chopped down through the ice to dip up water. He brought the horses down and let the thirsty animals drink. He fed them the best of the salvaged oats and took the bridles to the house to warm the frost out of the bits. In such cold they'd stick to a horse's lips on touch and take away hide when pulled free.

Moodily he began to clean his weapons while Irene silently handed him a cup of steaming black coffee and went back to the stove. Finally she broke a long silence between them.

"You'll be leaving today." she said, and it was no question.

"Just as soon as I can get some breakfast."

"If you'll watch this bacon for a few moments and turn your back I'll get ready to ride. "

"You're not riding with me," he said flatly. "Holmes is back at the ranch by now and of course he's frantic about what's happened to you."

"Quite a number of things," she admitted, with a faint smile. "I learned a lot about you and much about myself I didn't know. But do you hate me so much that you don't want me in sight? Did these horrible days and nights together in this place give you a full winter of cabin fever?"

"I'm just talking common sense. I never stopped to figure out why Holmes didn't marry you, or try to. It looked like a natural. You, the cattle baroness, and him the big educated man."

"It would have been practical," she said, turning over the sizzling bacon. "We even discussed it in the beginning. But Jeff had known many women, and perhaps I still had enough of Dad Snyder's ideals left to wait and hope for something better. Then he met Jean and went completely off his head over her."

"Quite natural in a man of his type," Stony sneered. "Looking upon all woman as natural prey, taking every one he could take, but when it came to marriage nothing but a sweet, wholesome, adoring virgin for him. He pushed viciously at the cleaning rod swathing a light film of oil down the barrel of the six-shooter. "But I know that the moment that storm broke during the night he was on his way here with men."

"He was in town when I left the ranch, was due back any hour, in fact."

"And he'll hit the breeze here and I'll kill him right in front of your eyes because of what he hired those foolish young bucks to attempt. It's easy to figure out how he felt when he got back to the ranch, knowing a storm was coming and that the bucks would close in, and then finding out that *you* were up here with me."

He laughed, an unpleasant sound. He added, "So you stay here and wait for him. *You* can tell him what that wounded buck told me. And you can tell him what to expect the moment I find out that the Yerkes family and young Williams are all right."

"I'll tell him," she answered quietly, without turning her head. "Tell him and give him time to get out of the country.

Because if Joe Cumberland is around when Jeff arrives, when and if you ever return you'll find your work done."

IX

WHEN Stony took the warmed bit and softened leather out to bridle and saddle up the black gelding, Irene didn't go with him. He led the animal back to the kitchen door and crunched inside in his riding overshoes. She said nothing while he used a cold firebrand to blacken the area around his eyes. The sun was coming up now and the glare of it on white ice could cause snow blindness.

He took the food Irene gave him, tied it back of the cantle, and chocked the repeater that had done such yoeman service during the seige into the saddle-boot. Only when he swung up into saddle did she speak.

"I sincerely hope, deep down in my heart, Stony, that you find the Yerkes family and Tony all right."

"For your peace of mind in years to come, so do I," he told her abruptly.

"I suppose there is a distinct possibility that we won't meet again. You'll finish your grim, bloody business here and go back to your own great place up in the Nations country."

He gave her a startled look. "Who told you about that?" he demanded harshly.

"Jeff"" she said quietly. "I sent him up during the fall to find out. Never mind why."

"I'll tell you why," he shot back at her. "You didn't go for Holmes in spite of his good looks and fine manners. Cumberland would never have been anything to you but a husband-hired hand with big fists to do your bruising. But right across Rube Hankins's Rafter R range to the north of here lies Nations country, a big chunk of which I lease. Must have been quite a shock when you found that out, wasn't it, Miss Snyder? The tramp line-rider son of Poke Burns having a few head of his own. It would have looked good to have combined those two outfits, wouldn't it, Baroness?"

"Very well, Stony," she answered, without rancor. "But some day you mght find out things about women you never seemed to have learned. Good-by, Stony, and I hope for your sake that you find Jean."

He rode into the blinding glare of the sun, cursing himself for having been cheap enough to say what he had to Irene in a fit of anger. But because of her Jean Yerkes had been prevented from moving into town to safety. Until he found her—safe—there would be no let up in the hatred for Irene Snyder.

He heard the bawling of cattle beginning to come out of draws and gullies, though the weaker—would never come out. They'd lie there and be chewed on by wolves and coyotes until their hides dried steel hard. The spring floods would carry away all that was left to the Salt Fork of the Brazos.

Moving dots appeared in the distance, coming from the north. Stony unslung his glasses and focused them, then rode forward to meet Rube Hankins of the Rafter R and his men.

"Hell of a storm," the old-timer roared from fifty yards away and wiped at his ice-laden gray mustache. "How'd you make out, Burns? "Half our stuff is probably ten miles over on Irene's range."

They rode up, five of them, bundled in heavy coats and some wearing thick wool caps. Stony briefly told them of the fight at the line cabin. Hankins immediately swung the head of his horse.

"Come on, he said gruffly. "We can make it to the Yerkes line camp in less than two hours in spite of the ice. Irene's fight with me about putting up a drift fence along my south boundary can wait. I've been going six hands round with her every year about strays since the old Colonel died."

They drove on eastward as fast as safe riding on the ice would allow and two miles farther on Stony swung away and rode over to a small mound in the snow. A bare hand stuck up from the drift

around the body, the fingers frozen iron hard. Stony pulled at the hand, the ice gave way with sharp cracking sounds, and Young Williams's pale face came into view.

Four bullet-holes through his body; and where his blond hair had been was now ringed in red. He'd been shot and scalped.

"Let's go," Stony said grimly and felt a tight hand pulling at his insides.

They were less than four miles from the cabin when another figure came into view, afoot and staggering. The horsemen loped over and stared down at a wild-eyed Joe Cumberland. A faint gleam of insanity was in those eyes.

"What happened to you, Joe?" Rube Hankins demanded.

"Comanches. Caught me just about the time the storm struck. I got away in the snow. Shot the mules and overturned the wagon. Been living under it on mule meat and frozen bacon and eating snow. Where you fellows going?"

HE DIDN'T appear even to see Stony Burns. Hankins turned to a slim young rider. "Take him up behind you, Pete. Come on, boys!"

They forgot about ice and drove forward, and to Stony it was the longest ride of his life. He was far out ahead of them when the line cabin came into view. His eyes darted first to the chimney and noted no smoke.

Racing to the corral he saw the dead carcass of a horse. Not far from the open kitchen door was the body of the dog. Stony leaped down and went inside the wrecked kitchen. He went into the bedroom, took a look, then turned and walked softly out.

He stood there all shaken inside and tried to roll a cigarette with fingers stiff and trembling and not from the cold. He was smoking calmly when the others hove into view. He was remembering how he had warned everybody and how Irene Snyder had refused to listen—she, the woman he had fought to save from other Comanches. If he had known this!

"Well?" bellowed Hankins and jumped down.

"Don't let any unmarried men go in the bedroom, Rube," Stony said quietly, recalling that U.S. cavalry regulations covered such situations on the frontier. Only married troopers were allowed to bury mutilated bodies of women.

"Who?" bellowed Hankins, his big face paling.

"Mrs. Yerkes. No sign of Jean or Ed. Have one of your men find some gunnysacks and bring them, Rube. Then go and cover her up. She's on the floor. They used fire."

"Riders coming from the south!" called out one of the men.

Stony stepped around the corner to look. About six of them from the ranch, and the man in front was Ed Yerkes—coming hard.

It would be a long time before Stony could forget the hours that followed the arrival of Ed Yerkes at the cabin where the war party had struck so swiftly and surely. A fighting, screaming man struggling in the arms of three of Hankins' punchers who were trying to keep him from entering his home where ashes from the fire that had been built on top of his wife as she lay spread-eagled were now cold. They wrestled the berserk man across the frozen ground to the shed and held him there where he sat crying before a fire while others dug into the frozen ground.

When it was all over, Stony called Rube Hankins aside. "Get him to your ranch, Rube, and keep him under guard night and day. Don't let him get hold of a knife or gun ar anything else he can kill himself with. If he gets away, Irene Snyder is a dead woman. For Mrs. Yerkes was the kind who stuck by her man."

"I know," grunted the big rancher. "I'll take care of him, Burns. Got to get one of the boys on a long cold ride to the nearest telegraph station. I'll look after Ed for a while and in the spring we can put his wife away in the cemetery in town. Hell is going to start popping all

over Texas after what the Comanches have done this time."

"Just enough," Stony replied. "that a lot of well-meaning fools are going out from ranches and towns and lose their scalps. It takes trained men to stand off odds up to twenty-five to one, and at least some of them get out alive."

Hankins blew his big cold-reddened nose to relieve some of the great emotion inside his heavy body. But the snort that followed was that typical of the cattlemen's opinion of troopers in general.

"Pah! Always too slow to start, too little when they get there, and most of the time too late. Where you going, Burns?"

"South into the Staked Plains country," was Stony's reply.

"Alone?" Rube Hankins stared at him aghast. "Are you crazy? It takes pack-mules with loads of extra water. It takes a compass. Goddlemighty, man, there's hundreds and hundreds of miles in there where you can't see anything but sand so white it look like snow."

"I've still hopes for Jean, Rube. I'm banking those hopes that some of the older chiefs I know are down there, men who haven't forgotten what happened after General Miles got back the Germaine sisters."

"Them Comanches wasn't thinking about that when they hit this cabin and grabbed Ed Yerkes's wife," Hankins said harshly, and then blew at his big nose again.

STONY went out to the shed. Ed Yerkes sat on a grain sack with his shaggy head buried deep between his knees, squeezing his ears with work-hardened hands until the veins stood out blue in his fingers. He was a picture of self-condemnation and grief.

Stony started to speak, but changed his mind. They could tell him later that there still was hope of finding Jean. He mounted the black gelding, suddenly undecided as to his next move.

By now, if his surmise about Holmes' worry over Irene was correct, the man who had sought savage vengeance against Stony and a girl who had spurned him would have arrived at the line cabin and found Irene. He would know that his murderous plot had failed, at least in part. And now Stony would be coming after him to exact violent death.

Stony rode over to the death cabin door where the men stood in uneasy silence, smoking and scuffing their boots in the snow. He looked down at Joe Cumberland, nothing friendly in his eyes.

He said, "What you and I have to settle can wait, Cumberland. The only reason you're not dead right now is because of that grave out there, that man sitting under the shed, and the fact that Irene Snyder may be needing you. I don't know what Holmes will do after she tells him what that wounded buck told us. Where'd you dump that wagon you stayed under during the storm?"

Cumberland pointed south and west. He said, "They caught sight of me when I was two miles from here and cut me off. I whipped the mules to a run. Must have gone about four miles before the snow closed in and I lost 'em. You'll find a big draw with two small cedars up on the north bank. I stopped the wagon right on the edge, freed the mules and shot them, then tipped over the bed."

Stony turned the black without another word and rode away into the blinding glare of sun on a sea of white.

X

FINDING the wagon was not difficult. In fact it was located for Stony by the coyotes and wolves a mile before he reached the spot. He saw the circle of thirty or forty coyotes hanging around; the dozen or so big timber wolves. They snarled and trotted away for a short distance at his approach but he knew they now were not hungry enough to attack.

The black snorted at the almost devoured mule carcasses and stood with ears flicking nervously at the wolves as Stony swung down and went to the

wagon. Fresh dirt was everywhere, thrown by scratching claws digging beneath the box.

The bacon and other meat was, of course, long since gone. But there was flour and beans and canned goods sufficient to last until he could find an isolated ranch or a small town.

He thought of Jean, then thought of Irene Snyder meeting a frantically riding Jeff Holmes, only to have her reveal to him that she knew who had instigated one of Texas's most diabolical crimes, and why.

Jean would have to wait. If she was safe ,a little more time would not matter. If not, then time would mean nothing. He turned the black back toward the cabin where he and a woman he hated had fought it out side by side and survived. If Holmes planned an ambush, hoping for Stony's return, then two could play at the same game.

He kept in the gullies below the skyline and used his glasses from vantage points at regular intervals. The land lay white and barren except where here and there a few of the hardier cattle pawed at windswept spots to get at the grass beneath the thin ice. He approached the cabin not from the east but from the west, after cutting a long circle. Where the war party had camped out of effective rifle range he swung from the black and tethered the mount to a tree. The gelding's keen sense of smell picked up Indian scent, which even wind and snow had not effaced, and stood with ears twitching nervously.

Nothing here. Only the bones of cattle and three-horned heads gnawed to white skeletal outlines in the frozen snow. Stony used his glasses, and his lips tightened grimly as he reslung them and jerked savagely at the.44 Colt repeater in its scabbard.

He had guessed right about Holmes. The man who had caused the horrible torture death of Ed Yerkes's wife had played Stony to come back.

He was west of the cabin. They were expecting him to come back along the trail from the cabin twenty miles to the eastward, where the tragedy had occurred. Stony crawled to the top of the draw, surveyed a hundred yards of open ground to the next draw, and began to run. He ran awkwardly in his boot overshoes, the crunch of the frozen snow beneath his feet sounding to him as loud as a herd of stampeding buffalo. But he made it apparently unseen and what he saw in the draw brought a cold grin to his hard face. Five horses tied down there, hidden from sight of any rider approaching from the east.

Young William's spare horse, the one Irene was to have ridden, was not among those down there with the Snyder brand on their slumped hips. Apparently Holmes had paid his men to stay behind and do the job the young bucks had been unable to accomplish.

Stony crawled forward hugging the bank of the draw, his thoughts turned toward Irene, wondering what *she* had thought when Jeff Holmes probably forced her away from the place, leaving his killers behind. For Stony had a feeling that she loved *him* now, or thought she did. Certainly no two people who had gone through what they had under the shadow of death could remain unaffected. And he believed now that underneath her shell of hardness she was very warm and human.

He worked his way to the horses and began slipping bridles. He swung the reins hard on the rump of the last horse, dropped the bridle, and dived for the protection of the bank as a thunder of hoofs awoke the quiet and a yell went up from two men hidden in the shed. They came out as Stony lifted his head above the bank in plain sight of them less than sixty yards away.

Two rifles went up. But the pump action repeater was faster and in the hands of a grim-faced man who knew how to use it. Two quick reports exploded on the morning air and two figures sprawled out, dark blobs on the blanket of white. Another yell went up from the cabin as Stony sprinted for the

back of the shed. He shoved the barrel of the deadly weapon through a crack in the wall and drove three more shots through a door already sieved by gunfire.

ONE scream, then dead silence except for the distant clatter of trotting hoofs out on the frozen plain. The brideless horses were heading straight back to the ranch with the instinct of homing pigeons and Holmes and his men —if he was with them—were afoot, miles from the nearest ranch.

"Come out of there, Holmes!" Stony roared and peered through the crack with the freshly loaded weapon ready.

A moment of silence, then a muffled voice came from inside the house. "He ain't here."

"Then toss out your guns and come out yourselves."

"What are you going to do to us?" the voice called anxiously.

"Burn that door down and slaughter all of you unless you come out of there damned pronto!" was the grim reply.

More hesitation, then the door was opened. A rifle and Colts sailed through, and three men who had jeered when Stony had been beaten by Joe Cumberland, emerged with their hands high, fear on their unshaved faces. The leader was the breed, Mike LeFeur.

Stony strode around the corner of the shed, stepped over the two sprawled bodies now turning the snow around them a bright warm red, and moved in on the three before the cabin.

He stood there flaming-eyed, a picture of cold fury, fighting down the urge to kill them as he had their two companions. Only LeFeur was grinning and unworried. The fingers of his right hand were clasped around his left bicep, fingers and coat sleeve slightly stained. A misshapen .44 slug had ricocheted off one or two of the walls and cut a small slash through the triceps muscle. A man named Trimble, big and yellow-haired also displayed not too much concern. The third man Stony ignored. He'd seen the type too many times before. Long-jawed and skinny necked and slightly humped; a weak, tractable man easily lured by talk of big money.

Stony stepped around them and moved toward the doorway, watching for movement from within.

"He ain't in there," Trimble grunted.

"He go away, by tam," LeFeur said.

"Where'd he go?" Stony snarled at them.

Trimble said, "We don't know, mister. That day the storm broke Jeff beat the snow to the ranch by minutes, and when he found out Miss Snyder had come up here with Joe he nigh busted a button. He drunk whisky till his eyes was all bloodshot. When that storm finally broke about two or three this morning he had us out fast. We bucked our way up here whilst Ed Yerkes and some more of the boys hit for his cabin to see how the women folks had made out. Well, we got up here and found that the boss was all right, and then—" He licked at his lips and glanced nervously at LeFeur, who grinned again.

"And then he left five of you behind to finish up the job some Indian bucks was supposed to do on me and didn't," Stony cut in. "You got any idea what Ed Yerkes found when he got to his home where some of us were waiting? We'd already found all that was left of Mrs. Yerkes after another war party hired by Holmes had hit the place about the same time one hit this line cabin. She'd been mutilated with knives while alive and finished off with a slow fire built on her body as she lay tied spread-eagled. Holmes did it to get back at Jean —had her taken away after they killed her mother. That's the man who hired you to wait for me—and you call yourselves *white men!*" His voice quivered with passion.

"Goddlemighty, mister," whimpered the weak-chinned puncher. "I—I didn't know nothing like that was being done. Not till Irene throwed it right at Jeff after we got here."

"Where'd he take her?" Stony snarled. "What's Holmes going to do

with Irene now ... t she can get him hanged?"

LeFeur answered with a careless shrug, "Who knows- W'at you now doing with os?"

"Drop your cartridge belts—damned quick," was the reply.

He picked up the gun LeFeur dropped, a new weapon he had heard something about but had never seen before. It was much heavier than a .44 and had a six-inch barrel. It was a brand new .45 caliber, developed by Colt and only that year delivered to the troops after exhaustive test firing by U.S. Army Ordnance men.

"Where'd you get the cannon?" Stony sneered at the little gunman. "Off some trooper after putting a bullet through his back?"

"By tam, I never shoot no man in the back!" LeFeur screamed as one of his lightning, uncontrollable rages shook him. "I buy dat gun twenty dollar!"

STONY dropped in disgust the thing that weighted his hand like a chunk of lead, and looked at the man with the weak chin. He said without emotion, "What Holmes has done is going to set this country on fire and turn men's brains red. The only reason I'm not killing you lobos is because I don't want you to die that easy. You're on foot in the middle of winter and miles from nowhere. If you hit east to the Yerkes cabin Joe Cumberland and Rube Hankins and his men would swing you on sight. There's no place you can go on foot and get very far. If you make it you'll be run down and hanged anyhow. Dump your matches on the ground and start walking—all three of you."

He picked up the rifles, two of which were .44-40's and levered the shells onto the hard snow, his main reason for making them shuck their belts. He broke the stocks and slung the pieces away and used the barrel of the new .45 to beat at the pins of the other two six-shooters. He used Trimble's gun to do the same to LeFeur's prized pistol while the smoky-eyed gunman watched.

He left them walking, and went into the cabin for kerosene, spreading it on the bunks, floor, and what furniture was left. When he left the black smoke already was rolling through the doorway, and four minutes later the new pole corral and shed were burning.

Stony tossed aside the empty five-gallon cans. First the grass and now one of her line cabins. The second installment on his debt to Irene Snyder had been paid.

He watched the three figures trudging away across the frozen plains, then mounted and rode away. Behind him black smoke made two funneling columns into the clear sky; ominous, twisting, as though presaging darker things to come. . . .

During the next two weeks Rube Hankin's prediction that hell would break loose over Texas came true. The whole state was in an uproar. The Comanches had not come south in one big body but in small parties of younger bucks scattered all over the vast raw country. Every troop in the state had been ordered out and more were coming down from Fort Supply and other forts from the Nations country. From his headquarters in Fort Leavenworth, General Nelson A. Miles had ordered no halt until the raiders were run down and either killed or brought back.

Patrols appeared everywhere, from San Antonio, from Ysleta six hundred miles to the west, near El Paso, from Forts Davis and Quitman and Griffin. Every available Texas Ranger was on duty, some hooking up with a company from Fort Hancock. Everywhere it was the same story—burned homes and the ashes of ranch houses. A stage was held up and torn letters from the mail sacks stuffed into the mutilations of the dead passengers. A lone Mexican sheepherder, caught while rendering hot tallow, was found with his head buried in the pot.

To make matters worse, said reports, Victorio, the Mescalero Apache, had

moved his headquarters from Lake Guzman in Chihuahua up through Borracho Pass and slipped on across into south Texas to join the Comanches who usually were his enemies.

Garbled reports were made by word of mouth because telegraph lines were being cut at the rate of a dozen a day. That much Comanche and Apache had learned from contact with the white man. Most of the wild reports were not true, but the ashes of homes and ranches were still found and sometimes here and there a woman was missing.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it ended, after nine clashes between troops and war parties in a little more than two weeks. Ranchers and others who had been out in unsuccessful attempts to find a fight and vent their helpless rage on the marauders boasted that the redskins had had enough. They knew when they were licked.

But the man who came out on a rise on a flat plain that day and pulled up to watch the horizon knew better. He wore a short beard now and was thin, as was the horse he rode. Stony Burns knew all too well why the fighting had stopped. More bad weather was coming. The Comanches knew and they had withdrawn deep into the fastness of the Staked Plain at water holes unknown to white men. Snug in their buffalo hide tepees they were certain that the Weather Spirit had listened to the supplication and incantations of their medicine men and that terrible storms would beat the white soldiers back.

X

QUIETLY sitting his horse with his head and body wrapped in the blanket Stony was not expecting the crack of a heavy rifle that came or the slug that screamed past his face. He wheeled the black and spurred for a shallow draw as a second shot boomed out not more than two hundred yards away. Dismounting with rifle in hand, he crawled back up the bank as a man in buckskin, followed by a hard riding officer and a sergeant charged toward him. The blanket fell to the ground and he strode into full view, waving his hands. The scout pulled up, yelled something in the wind, then the three of them rode forward gingerly and looked down at him.

"I guess I can't blame you too much," Stony said to the man in buckskin who looked more rancher than scout familiar with Indians. "I must have looked like an Indian in that blanket. But what the hell would have happened to you if I had been a Comanche lookout and fifty more were hiding down below this bank?"

The officer in heavy coat and fur cap, a man about thirty, solidly built, capable looking, said, "I'm Lieutenant Hagerman, sir. And I'm mighty glad we missed you."

"Burns," Stony said briefly. "Where are you from, Lieutenant?"

"Fort Supply, Captain Dobels commanding. Four troops. And you, Mr. Burns?"

"Also from up north. Heading for the Comanche stronghold down there." He waved toward the south, for they were now on the northern edge of the great Staked Plain, called the *Llano Estacado* by early Spanish explorers, a land so barren of vegetation and dry, with so few landmarks that the intrepid men from Mexico had been forced to put up a big row of stakes as guides for those who followed.

Lieutenant Hagerman and the buckskin man stared at him, but the sergeant kept a poker face.

"Surely, sir," the officer said gravely, "you can't realize what you are up against. More men have gone in there than have come out the other side. Not that we aren't going in," he added grimly, then spoke to the scout. "Well, Ricochet, you claimed to know the Staked Plain. You promised to find Indians for us. So far Mr. Burns here is the best you've been able to flush. Now what?"

"We'll get 'em, Cap," the old man assured, and pulled at his Buffalo Bill

Cody mustache and beard. "I can take you right to 'em, I tell you."

The officer glanced down the bank at Stony's horse which was carrying a too heavy pack tied back of the cantle. Stony's pack-horse had broken a foreleg, which had necessitated putting a merciful bullet through its head and leaving part of the supplies for the ever-hungry wolves. He had hopes of getting another pack animal from some ranch or Mexican goat or sheep camp.

"You're welcome to come back with us to the command, Mr. Burns," Lieutenant Hagerman suggested. "It's only four miles to the west."

Stony nodded. The wind was coming up as he glanced at the late evening sky; he didn't like the looks of the weather. He went down after the black, and Lieutenant Hagerman pulled a notebook from inside his heavy coat, slipped off a Berlin mitten, and began to write hurriedly.

> December 29th, 1875. Four p.m. On scout on northern edge of the Staked Plain. No sign of any hostiles' trail as yet. Possibly the wind obliterated tracks. Am beginning to lose faith in Scout Leeman. He appears too vague with precise information. Very cold and looks as though worse is coming. Found one lone rider named—he said—Burns. Either an outlaw or a fool. Taking him back to Captain Dobels.

He shoved the notebook out of sight as Stony returned and they set off at a trot, Stony once more wrapped in the blanket. Let them think what they pleased. He was riding as an Indian rode and he was not cold. But as he rode faces came back to him as they had been coming every day and even at night in his dreams—the faces of Jean, of Irene Snyder, Holmes and Hankins, and the black-bearded face of LeFeur, the breed gunman. Faces he might have known a long, long time back in the past.

THEY found the troop encamped in a long, flat-bottomed draw and in fairly good shelter from the wind which was gradually rising to a whistling crescendo. Four troops of sixty men each; pack animals and horses on long picket lines, eating oats that could ill be spared. A few smoky fires were going and three officers were working their way along the lines of picketed animals, conducting Evening Stables. Inspecting for cuts, bruises, pulled tendons, incurred during the day's ride.

Stony unpacked and hobbled the black and fed him from his own oat supply. Lieutenant Hagerman came up and gave him a friendly smile.

"Captain Dobels wants to see you in his tent," he said.

As they entered the commanding officer's tent and Lieutenant Hagerman saluted, Stony saw a man far past middle-age. Probably a Civil War veteran of once high rank, now demoted to a permanent captaincy on the frontier; beaten, frustrated, slogging through a rut until he could retire.

The junior officer made his report.

The look the short-bearded, heavy-faced captain turned upon Stony then was decidedly not friendly. He said curtly, "What reason would you have for being down here on a worn-out horse at this time of year?"

"I believe Lieutenant Hagerman has just told you, sir."

"Sir? So you've seen military service?"

"I have, sir."

"Where?" barked Dobels.

"At Chancellorville, when Stonewall Jackson was killed, among other places." This time Stony spoke curtly and did not say "sir."

"I think you're a liar," was Dobel's astonishing reply. "If you're not, you wouldn't be the first man to turn renegade after the war. Have you ever met a man named Jeff Holmes?"

"I have," was Stony's grim reply.

"I thought so. We scattered him and his bunch to the four winds. We and these men who call themselves Texas Rangers. Your name may be Burns or it may not be Burns. You can consider yourself under military arrest until you

can prove just who you are and why you are here. Put the prisoner under guard, Lieutenant."

Out in the wind again Stony glanced at the junior officer. "Don't say it," he said drily. "It's against regulations. But I served under a colonel once who also was mentally sick, and I was broken back to the ranks because I disobeyed him to save a few lives. I don't envy you on this patrol, Lieutenant."

"Thank you," the lieutenant said soberly.

"That business about Holmes," Stony said. "The captain didn't mention details. Perhaps you could tell me something about it."

"Well," said Hagerman, "we found out through sources up at the agency in the Nations country that he was responsible for one or two of the atrocities perpetrated when the Comanches swept southward. He kidnapped a woman cattle owner named Snyder and had disappeared with her. He turned out to be the leader of at least a hundred of the worst desperados in the whole country, and we have evidence that they're operating one of the oldest tricks in the business. Leaving Indian sign behind after burning a ranch and running off all the cattle. The Rangers caught up with some of them and either killed them or the men died from 'accidents.'"

"I see," Stony said.

He thought he could get the picture. Like a ranch horse once lured away by a wild stallion and becoming from previous experience more cunning than the wild one, the educated and brilliant Holmes had turned outlaw playing for big stakes. He'd taken Irene with him to save his own neck and maybe with an eye to cashing in on her fabulous holdings. A forced marriage?

Stony remembered how she had handled the .44 Colt repeater, pumping shots through the splintered cabin door. Whatever Holmes might do to her, he'd never be her husband.

Stony slept that night in a small tent with Sergeant Beuler, the noncom who had been with Lieutenant Hagerman and the scout when they had found him. Sentries paced outside. The wind, having died down somewhat during the night, took up its whistling song at daybreak as men squatted shiveringly over fires and ate bacon and hardtack soaked in bacon grease and drank scalding coffee of their own making.

The troop got under way and turned southward across the plain, with the garrulous old scout in the lead.

DURING the trek, the old fellow got a chance to tell the story of his life to Stony in all its interesting details. "You want to know why they call me Ricochet, Mistuh Burns? Well, I was with the Rangers when the country was full up of some real badmen at the end of the war. Had to keep after 'em day and night. Mexicans, too, though we couldn't kill 'em like most of us wanted to. But I had to go after this one feller and when I spotted him he turned and started shooting at me. Well, sir, I took a shot at his horse, but my aim was bad that day. That ball struck a rock and bounced off and hit that Mex by accident, and the fellers joshed me so much about bad shooting they named me Ricochet."

Lieutenant Hagerman wrote in his notebook:

> Two p.m. January 4, 1876. We've stopped to graze ten minutes in a small patch of grass near some undrinkable water. Four days and three nights now. Weather very bad. I'm certain the old scout is completely lost. Captain Dobels is not a well man. Too many of those pills the post surgeon gave him. He's losing his grip and every man in the troop senses it. As far as the eye can see there is nothing but low sandhills, absolutely barren of vegetation, almost as white as snow. It bewilders the brain, chokes the throat, parches the lips. The animals are not eating. Tongues begin to swell. The prisoner Burns says nothing. Sergeant Beuler has strict orders from me *not* to shoot him as Captain Dobels ordered if he attempts to escape. Wonder what General Phil Sheridan in Chicago has cooked up for General Terry and Custer at Fort Lincoln in regards to the Sioux this spring. Hope I get transferred to Custer's Seventh. Much better chances for promotion.

Up ahead the commander sat facing the old scout with the beard and flowing locks. With Dobels waving his arms and screaming, it took no second look at the faces of the troopers to know what they felt. It was shame and humiliation that such a thing could happen to a branch of the service with such traditions behind it.

The old man *was* completely lost but was stubbornly insisting, "We'll find 'em yet, Cap. I ain't lost. Just got to wait till this storm clears a bit so's I can see."

Lieutenant Hagerman looked at Stony sitting beside him. He said, "You've hardly spoken a word in the past thirty-six hours, Stony. You're packing more feed and water on that horse of yours than we have for the other animals, yet you've made no attempt to escape in the storm. And you know we're lost and our position is getting desperate."

Stony nodded toward the sixty troopers behind them, Lieutenant Hagerman's Troop E.

He said, "I understand they do a pretty good job with a forty-five-seventy Springfield carbine on the practice range at two hundred yards. My back is about the same size as a target but a lot easier to hit at less than a hundred paces."

"Do you think you could find water?"

"I don't know how soon, but I think so. Something the Indians up in the Nations told me when—"

A call came down the line. Lieutenant Hagerman was wanted up front at a gallop. Stony watched him dash forward, listen to Dobels' angry outburst, then sent back a call.

"They want you, Burns," Sergeant Beuler said.

Stony jogged the heavily-loaded black forward and pulled up near the Captain. He waited, watching the man's tired, flushed face, the eyes roving feverishly. Dobels had been mostly a garrison officer until the great outbreak of the Comanches had put every man in the saddle.

"Burns," he snapped, "or whatever your real name is Lieutenant Hagerman seems to think you can ride out and miraculously produce water. Would you deign to tell a mere army officer what powers you possess to produce this miracle?"

Stony said, "The Indians don't need occult powers to know where it is, sir. For generations they have studied this country. They say that in the east portion of Texas there is much timber, which means wet country. In the center it's a little drier, but there's enough needle wheat grass, and mesquite beans for horse food. The farther west you go the less rainfall—about fifteen inches, I believe, sir, which is practically desert. That's why I almost overburdened my horse with extra water, sir. I've known ever since we entered the Staked Plains that you were too far west by miles."

"Then why didn't you so inform me?" bellowed the captain, his face flushing, his bloodshot eyes flaming.

"Because I was a prisoner, sir," was the dry reply, "under sentence to be shot if I tried to escape."

XII

DOBELS turned on the old scout whose long goatee was whipping a gray streak past one jawbone.

"Get back to the pack mules where you belong," he ordered harshly. "Troops will dismount, Lieutenant. Lead off, Mr. Burns."

Stony swung them off to the southwest and a grim ordeal began in earnest. Walk twenty minutes, mount and ride thirty minutes, stop and rest ten minutes every hour. Darkness came down, but the hungry, thirsty command did not stop. It went on all night long while the mules snuffled and the horses blew slobberingly as the increasing wind whipped fine sand into clothes, the pores of men's skin, into their eyes.

Morning broke over a bedraggled string of men and horses in a long thin line across the arid plains. They shivered and cursed, those still able to walk,

and those who had faltered sat their saddles and stared with eyes dulled and glazed. They had come more than thirty miles during the night. But ahead of them the horizon was beginning to break and back of them the white sand-hills had disappeared.

At noon they finally topped a long rise and saw the small lake in a wide swale below, a patch of blue and brown in a land of endless sands. Dobels lost all control of his command then, his screaming orders unheard as men and horses and mules plunged forward to the precious water. The edge of the lake became a threshing, confused jumble of cursing, yelling men as mules and some of the horses bogged down and drowned.

Stony watered his black and, after unsaddling, gave him a generous feed of the small supply of oats remaining in the pack. He took his rifle and began a circle of the small lake. He heard a call and waited for Lieutenant Hagerman, leaving the competent Sergeant Beuler in charge to bring order out of confusion in Troop E.

"Orders," Hagerman grinned drily. "You're still a prisoner, you know. Where you going?"

Stony grinned for the first time in days, with a sense of jubilation. It wouldn't be long now until he'd see Jean Yerkes.

"Looking for the mail-box, Charley," he said to Hagerman.

"Mail-box?" demanded the officer.

"Come on."

They circled the small lake, striding through the needle and wheat grass which though dry and brown, had the same nourishment in it as in the summer. Men boasted that an old burro turned loose on that grass and the distilled spirits of the sun and rain inside mesquite beans he'd become a wild young bronc within a month.

A number of white objects came into view, sticking up from the brown grass.

Hagerman burst out, "What the hell? An Indian winter graveyard?"

"Buffalo shoulder-blade bones," Stony explained. "Let's see what they have to say."

Ira La La

A honkytonk gal in Agraria,
Met a poke who wanted to marry her—
Didn't offer a thing,
But just asked her to sing—
And so she gave him—the aria!

—Pecos Pete

He moved in among them, bending to look closely at those with the fresher markings, studying the weird symbols painted in red and black. When he straightened, he said to Hagerman, who was studying the bones uncomprehendingly.

"They're about thirty miles south of here, Charley, in their main winter camp. They've got five white women captives, one of whom I hope is that girl I told you about—Jean Yerkes."

Hagerman looked across the water to where Dobels was gradually reestablishing order. "Anything else?"

"Yes. Victorio, the Mescalero Apache, has been here. In the fall. And, Charley, there's plenty of mescal liquor here. Better not let the troops know."

"What?"

"I'll try to find it and destroy it."

"How the hell can you tell that Stony?" demanded the amazed officer.

"Indian liquor, made from wild plants, has a peculiar odor that you can identify the moment you smell it. It carries a long way to a man who's smelled the stuff for years. My guess is that when old Vic brought his stolen Mexican horses here loaded down with mescal plants he threw a big celebration, then put away a good supply for next spring and summer."

THEY circled the lake and returned to the troop. Captain Dobel's tent was up, the watered horses were grazing hungrily, and fires already were going from the plentiful supply of buffalo chips dropped by the herds on their migration to winter feeding grounds. Dobel sat on a folding chair in his tent, feverishly writing his day's report. Hagerman went inside.

Stony was passing a group of troopers near a fire and one called him over.

"Sure glad you happened to be along, mister. Hadn't been for you our bones would have been found by the next outfit to come through. It stinks like hell around here but I never smelled nothing better in my life. Almost like the sutler's whisky up at Fort Supply."

Stony already had noted a grass-covered mound nearby, undiscernible at a casual glance, and the odor came distinctly to his nostrils. It was there, cooked by Victorio's women and girls, buried in a horsehide vat. Fifty gallons of it, at least. . . .

Dawn broke with a howling blizzard whipping at the troop and freezing the lake around the edges with a ragged coating of thin ice—the third big snowstorm of that terrible winter. It slashed down upon a camp of utter misery. The accidental discovery by some of the troopers the night before of an open pit of mescal before Stony could get Hagerman to it had sent all the troopers in a mad scramble. They now sat gagging and retching, too ill to take orders, too miserable to care.

Stony himself was sick inside, but with a sickness of a different kind. Now, he knew, was the time to hit the Comanche camp during a storm which could be a godsend to the soldiers. The Indians would be snug and warm in their tepees of buffalo hide, sure that no troops would ever be this close to them. A sudden charge on the camp now and any battle would quickly become a rout.

But not until the end of the third day did Captain Dobels give the order to proceed south. The snow was still driving, but the cold had lessened somewhat. Captain Dobels appeared to be more himself, again a commander with well-trained troops to obey his orders. At five in the afternoon Stony had him halt the four troops on the edge of a narrow defile leading to what probably was flat country below.

"They can't be more than a mile below here, sir," he informed Dobels. "And the fact that they feel secure enough not to have sentries out speaks for itself. They can be taken by complete surprise."

"I have no intention of taking them by surprise," was the captain's cool reply. "Our very presence here at an encampment they consider impregnable will prove to them that to fight is useless, a waste of lives on both sides."

"But good God, sir," Stony burst out. "There are white women prisoners down there! You know what always happens when a camp is attacked. Those women will be killed the moment the bucks spot us."

Jean was there—he was certain of it now. He knew what she had been through and could only hope that she had not been forced to witness her mother's horrible death. Had she been weak, it might be better the stubborn captain's way. A quick death rather than a life-time of agony. But Stony had sensed Jean's inherent strength from the moment he had met her. She would fight for life.

He glanced at Lieutenant Hagerman and the three other junior officers sitting their horses in a half circle and

said to the captain, "Very well, sir. I might be wrong, and if you'll allow me to take Lieutenant Hagerman, I'll look around a bit."

As they rode away together, Stony said to the lieutenant, "It's suicide for the troops and plain murder for five American women."

"I know," Hagerman said soberly.

"Then go back," Stony said harshly. "Take a chance on your career for the sake of five women. Go back and when the first Indian yell goes up, damn Dobels and order a charge!"

Hagerman looked at Stony steadily, then removed a Berlin mitten and extended his hand. "I hope you find her, Stony," he said softly.

He rode back, and the snow swallowed him up. Stony rode down a rocky declivity to a flat grassland floor. He wrapped his blanket around him so that it covered his entire body, except for his overshoes. Only his eyes were visible, and when he rode past the first tepee, not even a dog barked at him. Smoke came to his nostrils and with it the rank odor of dead animals—old horses killed to provide meat for the mangy curs always in evidence but now mostly inside. He rode the length of the village, seeing a hundred or so lodges. He was sure Jean was in one of them. But how to find her?

He was at the far end of the village when the unmistakable rattle of cavalry accoutrements cut through the high whine of the wind. A shrill screech of warning went up. A muffled-up patrolling Indian had spotted the oncoming troop!

Stony heard Hagerman roar an order and it was followed by a bugle call. Then two hundred and sixty troopers were thundering into the lodge-lined street and the buffalo hide flaps flew back as a stream of startled people spewed forth. Men, women, children, and dogs.

Guns began to boom. First the single-shot .45-70s, then the heavier report of Colt's new revolving .45-caliber pistol. The hollow *pong* of muzzle loaders in Comanche hands, and the sharper crack of repeating Winchesters taken from burned ranches.

Stony raced the length of the lodges, his blanket slashed away by sabers.

Then he saw her out in front of a lodge with two other white women! Dressed in buckskin and the tatters of white woman's clothing, but Jean just the same!

A buck drove hard at her with drawn bow. Stony shot him off his horse, spurring the black and yelling, "Jean! Jean, it's Stony!"

He heard her cry as he spurred down upon her, swept her up into his arms and wheeled away between two lodges. She had both arms around his neck and he heard her saying over and over, "Stony, Stony! I knew you'd come! I knew you'd get here!"

The black was running awkwardly through the snow, valiantly carrying the double burden upon its already heavily loaded back. Its hoofs made scrambling sounds as Stony forced it up a steep bank to a group of stunted mesquite. He let Jean slide to the ground on her moccasined feet.

"Lie flat and cover yourself with snow," he told her quickly. "Those bucks will be running all around here on foot and on horseback. Damn Dobels for being stupid fool enough not to stampede their horses first."

He wheeled and sent the black down the bank and into the thick of the fight. In little more than half an hour the camp had been surrounded and most of the Comanches there were captured or dead. Thirteen soldiers had been killed, among them Captain Dobels. Some bucks had got away, and as the air cleared to presage the end of the storm, they could be seen out of gunshot range, watching the scene below.

As Stony rode past the tepee where he had found Jean, he turned his face away from the huddled figures in ragged skirts on the ground. The Comanches were living up to their reputation.

In a circle of sullen warriors Stony

sat his horse and interpreted the words of a chief of whom he had heard but did not know personally. The surly brute had named himself Santana, after the notorious old chief of the murderous Kiowas who had been such good friends and allies of the Comanches.

"The women prisoners?" Hagerman kept demanding angrily. "There are two still not found. Where are they?"

As it turned out, they had been killed previously, and the surly Comanche was trying to stall the soldiers with the usual complaints about the injustices his people suffered. Hagerman demanded that those watching bucks up there out of gunshot be ordered in. If they weren't, he promised that every man in the village would be shot.

STONY rode back up the slope at a lope as shouts began to go up. He saw Jean's snow-covered figure emerge, and he slipped a foot from the stirrup so she could mount into his arms.

He knew the first question she would ask as they rode back and dreaded hearing it. But when she asked it, he answered as gently as possible. "Yes, Jean, you lost your mother."

"I knew, of course," she said wearily. "I heard her scream as they grabbed me and threw me on a horse, and two of them took me away into the storm. What about Ed, Stony?"

"In pretty bad shape, Jean. Rube Hankins has him at his ranch, watching out for him. But right now there's a job for you to do. Identify the guilty. But maybe you know that Jeff Holmes is the cause of all this terror."

"Yes," she said simply. "He's been here."

"Here?" he demanded incredulously.

"Twice. That's why I—wasn't treated as the other women were. The last time he was here he said he'd be back once more to take me with him and that I must go willingly. He's an outlaw leader now with a hundred men back of him. They're going to sweep Irene's range clear in the spring and drive up the trail to Dodge City. One big haul before they escape to Mexico."

They had reached the encampment now where wounded soldiers lay inside tepees under the care of the surgeon, while more than two hundred and twenty-five others, sabers and pistols in hand, were lining up the bucks in twin rows. Others came down on their ponies and arrogantly took their places in line.

Stony slid Jean to the ground, then dismounted. Lieutenant Hagerman strode up, his grim features softening at sight of the girl.

"Miss Yerkes," he said, "Stony has told me much about you. I'm glad we found you. Now I want you to walk down this line and identify each buck who took part in that raid upon your home. Don't hesitate. I'm acting upon direct orders from General Nelson Miles to Captain Dobels, deceased."

They started down the line, and Jean pointed to a tall Indian covered with a buffalo robe almost to the eyes. Another and another. Soldiers pulled them out and tied their hands behind their backs. The group grew until there were more than thirty.

"Those are the ones, Lieutenant," Jean said. "Some I saw at the time of the raid. Others I heard boasting."

"Sergeant Beuler!" snapped Hagerman.

"Yes, sir." Beuler's mittened hand went up in a sharp salute.

"They have thirty minutes to say good-by to their families. Then kneel them before a line of picked soldiers. One shot each through the back of the head."

Stony left and rode out to the horse herd which had stampeded but now was trickling back toward the little stream. His experienced eye spotted horses that were not Indian and presently he rode back with two gentle ones, one to be used as a pack-horse. He heard a ragged volley of shots, then howls and wails began. Comanches mourning their own dead.

But there was no room for mourning

in Stony Burns's heart. His nights of agony and waiting were over, uncertainty gone. He'd found Jean and that was all that mattered. Half an hour later as he and the girl sat their horses, Hagerman strode over to them.

"So you're leaving right away? Well, I'll be following you as soon as my wounded can travel in mule travoises. It probably will be spring before I get back to the reservation, but I believe there'll be no more real trouble now."

"I'll be over to see you if I can get away from calf roundup," Stony said as they shook hands.

"Better make it fast, Stony. I won't be around much longer."

"Leaving the service?" Stony asked in surprise.

"No." Lieutenant Hagerman grinned. "Before I left the colonel okayed a transfer I'd asked for and forwarded it to General Miles. I'll be joining Custer's Seventh this spring for the big summer campaign they say is being planned against the Sioux up in Montana."

XIII

ON A cold but bright winter day a party of seven bearded troopers, a civilian, and a lone woman rode into the little Texas town of Serino, miles away from the desolation they had left far to the south. It wasn't much of a town, Serino, but it was a water stop along the rickety railroad branch that poked its uncertain way across the country. The telegraph lines that old Victorio, the Mescalero Apache, had cut were working again, and a corporal had Lieutenant Hagerman's complete report to be telegraphed to General Nelson A. Miles at Fort Leavenworth.

Stony felt a special satisfaction in knowing that his name was mentioned in the report because he knew Miles would remember him as a scout during the big fight at the Washita.

Stony was not thinking of that so much, however, as about Irene and what had happened to her. Too, he wondered where Holmes was now. After weeks away from civilization, he had been cut off completely from news of the outside world.

They jogged up the muddy street and pulled up before a building with a crude sign in front proclaiming it to be a hotel. He left Jean there and he and the troopers put away their worn-out horses while the corporal rode to the depot to send his telegram.

Stony made his way through the mud across the street to the combination constable-deputy sheriff-Texas Ranger office. He stepped inside and confronted a lone man, a deputy from the county seat miles away. Introducing himself, Stony shook hands and began to ask questions.

"Holmes?" young Deputy Simmons repeated. "No, he ain't been caught yet. He's running high, wide, and handsome. Nothing like it since the days right after the war, according to old-timers."

Stony, rolling a cigarette, asked, "Why? What's wrong with the Rangers?"

"Not a one in this part of the country, Burns. And we're helpless in the face of night-riders numbering at least two hundred or more. Raiding and burning and running off cattle. The Rangers are all on the Border. Them Mexicans again."

Stony understood all too well. It had begun in 1825 when people had poured into Texas, fleeing from the Mexican Government. Thirty thousand by 1830, when the alarmed Mexicans passed a speedy law barring all others. Less friction until 1835. The revolution of that year, a declaration of independence on March 2, 1836; the fall of the Alamo and bloody slaughter of March 6; a bloody Mexican defeat March 21 at San Jacinto.

But the Centralist Party in Mexico had not given up dreams of conquest, and in 1840 papers found on the body of one Manuel Flores revealed the fantastic plot of the Centralist Mexicans to

unite with Cherokees, Karankawa, Waco, Lipan, and other Indian tribes to take the entire country. Bankrupt Texas had organized a few years before a body of men known as "mounted gunmen to range and protect the frontier"—the sturdy but small band of Texas Rangers who now rode the vast land.

"So that's about it, Burns," the deputy told him soberly. "There was a revolution down south during the fall and winter, and them generals who didn't get shot come north and are gathering every man they can find. Every Ranger in the service is down there, and right now the rest of Texas has less law than it's had since before we was admitted to statehood thirty years ago. Holmes and his marauders have a free hand, and they're making the most of it. They're roving over a country hundreds of miles wide and taking what they want. He's got spies in every part of the state." Simmons rose and pulled out a big stem-winding silver watch. "I've got to get home to my wife and baby for supper. Might see you later tonight if you're around."

"Nobody knows where Holmes's headquarters might be?" Stony insisted.

"Nobody," was the bitter reply. "If they did, the Rangers wouldn't be *that* busy fighting *revoltosos* and smugglers down on the Border."

They parted on the boardwalk, and Stony slogged through the half-frozen mud to the opposite side of the road. He was not a prepossessing figure at the moment, and he knew it. His black beard was more than a month of growth, and his hair was beginning to creep down around his ears. He smelled of dirt and sweat and horse and of antelope and deer and other wild game he'd skinned.

AS HE walked past a saloon a face inside suddenly leaped out like an old picture from the past. Something went cold inside of him, and his fingers instinctively unbuttoned his wind-breaker.

The chill was still inside him when he pushed through the doorway. He looked at the yellow-bearded man at the bar and the two uncouth riders who were with him.

"Hello, Trimble," he said to the big man he'd last seen when he disarmed the fellow in front of the line cabin on Irene Snyder's north boundary and whom he had later watched trudge out across the frozen snow.

Trimble turned casually, bearded lips parted in a grin, his eyes amusedly surveying the ragged man who faced him. He said, without taking his eyes off Stony, "Curt, Johnny, this is Stony Burns, who made me and Mike and another gent do some walking."

"Where's Jeff Holmes?" Stony asked quietly. He had no eyes for the other two men, but he did see that other customers were quickly moving away from the rough bar and out of line of possible gunfire.

"We went back to the cabin after you rode out of sight," Trimble replied maliciously, ignoring the question. "Mike and me, having sent our *compadre* on his way with a warning to keep going. His froze carcass is probably out on the prairie some place. But me and Mike came back to the fire, Burns. We got busted guns back and straightened the hammer pins. Mike found some forty-five cartridges you threw away. We put two more graves out back of the shed. We was kind of fond of them two boys you killed, Burns."

"I asked about Holmes," Stony said harshly. "Where can I find him?"

He caught the instinctive hunch of Trimble's right shoulder as the muscles galvanized into action for the downward swoop of his right hand, and flashed his own hand to his hip beneath the heavy coat. The .44 was firing twice near the sheath as Stony got it higher and turned the new and deadly weapon on Trimble's companions who were clawing frantically for their guns.

Short lashes of flame spurted out with the death-dealing crashes of pistols. Stony flung himself aside, thumbing

shots until the hammer clicked upon an empty chamber.

Trimble was down, half twisted on his side, one of his spurred boots raking convulsively at the bar rail. The two other men were dead, but from the doorway back of Stony something clattered hard to the floor. He spun around with the useless Colt still in his hand.

Simmons, the deputy who'd been on his way home to supper, was half bent forward, both hands clasped across his middle, strangled grunts coming hard out of his throat. A bullet from the wildly firing Curt or Johnny had caught him as Stony had leaped aside.

"Followed you over," he gasped out as Stony jumped forward and grabbed him. "Just a hunch. I'm glad—you got them."

The fat, elderly bartender came at a stumbling shamble and grabbed hold of the stricken officer from the other side, supporting his sagging weight.

"Let's get him over there across a couple of tables," he said. "Hurry it up, boys." And to Stony, "They been here two-three days, them three. Pete here has been keeping an eye on 'em. Where you hit, Pete?"

They got the lawman on the table and stretched him out on his back. The stray bullet intended for Stony had caught the officer low on the right side, and Stony breathed a sigh of relief.

Simmons said weakly, "Some of Holmes's outlaws, Burns? Good. I thought so but didn't have any proof. Tom—" to the bartender pulling at bloody shirt and trousers— "send somebody over to tell Iletha I ain't bad hurt."

Stony pushed his way past excited men to the front door. He knew the shots must have been heard all over town. Jean had heard them for she was running to meet him.

"Stony! You're all right. I heard the shots even in my room!"

"Trimble and two other owlhoots," he said. "But he wouldn't tell where Jeff Holmes is."

"Meaning, of course, that you'll have to go find him yourself. Alone. You against whole bands. And word of this will go over the wires to every newspaper in Texas. Jeff'll know!"

Stony said grimly, "He has known all along, Jean. Now you run back to the hotel while I get shaved and get some new clothes. We look like—"

"A buck and a squaw." She laughed with sheer relief from fear and tension.

THE train came in on the spur line about eight. It would make a return trip to the main railroad that night. While smoke swirled up from the bell-mouth stack of the locomotive Stony said good-by to Jean Yerkes. A new Jean in clean clothes and pretty in spite of the haunted look in her eyes.

She was going back to her father; back to help fill the heart-tearing gap in his life. If necessary, she would go with him to another of the line camps. Her life work was cut out for her now, as was Stony's. Word of the fight had gone out on the wires, written luridly by a whisky-sodden has-been who once had been an editor. The blood-thirsty account was typical of the times in 1875 when even *Harper's Weekly* was not averse to printing stories garishly exploiting frontier life.

Farmers, ranchers and cowpunchers would gobble up that story, exaggerations and all, the details expanding with each telling. Stony was a marked man now but he would not relinquish his self-imposed task. Jean thought she knew what it was, too, that night at the train.

"I hope you find her, Stony," she said softly as the conductor called.

He said simply, "I'll try to, Jean. She had her faults but she learned quickly to admit them and certainly never deserved the bad luck she's had since Holmes has known she could hang him. I'm going after her. I won't come back till I bring her—or find her grave. Good-by, Jean."

"Good-by, Stony."

The train pulled out, and he was alone again, more lonely than he'd ever been

in his life, as he made his way toward Simmons's house.

XIV

SPRING came early to Texas that year of 1876. It was as though the storm gods of winter, in abject apology for the suffering and damage they had caused, were trying to make amends; first with freshets of rain and then warm bright sun that sent the green shoots of wheat and needle grass in the south and the buffalo or grama grass in the Panhandle up through the bursting soil.

It was calf roundup time again, though many cattlemen felt that it was a waste of time with the land still in the control of the lawless. The forces below the Mexican border were demonstrating vociferously, ranches were still being raided and men killed, and Indian sign was being left now, with the Comanches back in the Nations country.

Reports drifted from various quarters that Jeff Holmes was working a small army now and cared nothing at all for the law, whether dispensed by local sheriffs or by the Rangers. Other reports told of dead men being found along the trails, beside campfires, even in their beds, each with a stone beneath his head. Reports also were circulated about a gunman who rode alone, always on the move from one part of the country to another. Stony Burns, the man whose lightning-fast gun had exterminated three of Holmes's outlaw band, one of them a trusted lieutenant.

But Stony had seldom been seen in any town because Holmes had men in every town, waiting and watching for him. The outlaw leader who was rapidly becoming a fabulous figure had no illusion about Stony Burns. He knew well the caliber of the man who was after him.

Down in Graham county, a group of ranchers were planning to form a Texas Cattle Raisers Association, banding together to wipe out the pillagers. But cattle continued to disappear—by the thousands—and when owners went hunting for lost winter herds, they were met on the boundaries of certain big ranches by hard-faced, heavily-armed riders who often killed on sight.

Only then did truth begin to come to light. While honest men were planning to band together to protect themselves, other ranchers not so honest already had banded together under the leadership of the brilliant Jeff Holmes and had loaded their ranges for the great drives to Kansas—the greatest mass cattle theft in Texas history!

On a night in late March, in the great ranch house of a highly respected cattleman, about forty men were assembled in a huge living room where six-foot logs roared flame up a massive stone chimney of the fireplace. Leaning a big shoulder against the wall, Jeffrey Holmes surveyed the room. He wore a short brown beard and a mustache now, knee-high boots, and one of the new model .45 Colts sagged over a thigh so big and powerful it stretched the seams of his wool trousers.

He raised his hand for silence, and the buzz of laughter and conversation ceased at once. Tobacco smoke roiled upward to the smoky beams of the big room.

"I had you men here tonight," the outlaw announced, "because our big drives are about ready to begin. We've worked hard during the past few months and most of your ranges are overcrowded with cattle wearing as many as eight different brands. Ferguson"—he spoke to a slender, wire-haired man whose features showed a distinct trace of Indian blood—"you'll make the first drive from your place the moment you get back and can start trailing them. Most of the men who formerly owned the brands on your cattle are now dead. You have bills of sale to prove ownership. You should have no trouble."

"Maybe so, maybe not, Jeff." Ferguson gestured with the stem of his blackened corncob pipe. "I'll gamble, sure. But what about them fellers down in Graham county beginning to get together against us?"

"My dear fellow," Holmes said patronizingly, "they are *honest* men, and honest men are held in check by their consciences from taking any arbitrary action. They must proceed slowly and cautiously so they can boast to the whole world, 'We done it up fair and square.' "

He lifted his hand again to quiet the laughter. "In a business like this," he went on, "there is no time for haggling, as those men will spend a whole year doing. By that time it will be too late for them to do anything else."

ANOTHER rancher suggested dubiously, "What about this Stony Burns gent? Take a look at what happened during the winter! We caught and killed that Blue Belly soldier that Captain Dobels had sent back to telegraph General Miles about their progress and where they was going. Said he had a prisoner named Burns, supposed to be one of your men. You put out eight groups of men to wait for them to come out of the *Llano Estacado* and get that gun thrower. Trimble and two others spotted them in Serino, and look what happened to them! He killed all three of them and that girl got clean away."

"Leave the girl out of it," Holmes said coldly.

"All right. But since then twenty-eight men have been found dead with stones under their heads. Twenty-eight of our men! Burns didn't kill all them men, Jeff, sometimes a hundred miles apart on the same day. He's done what them fellers down in Graham county ain't got around to yet. He's been riding from one ranch to the other, talking to men other honest ranchers sent him to. It means that for every one of us in this pool he's got just as many or more lined up against us!"

"And five of those men are dead, their cattle split up on your ranges," Holmes answered easily.

"What about the Rangers and soldiers?" called another man.

Holmes shoved away from the wall, standing spraddle-legged, and imposing.

"There will be no trouble with the Rangers," he said flatly. "They've been busy on the Border and will be for some time. There are men on my pay-roll whose job is to range up and down the river, raiding cattle and driving them into Mexico, leaving a plain trail to follow. The Border country is a hornets' nest of outraged citizens and Rangers fighting Mexicans to get back rustled cattle."

"What about the soldiers?" persisted the other man stubbornly. "I don't want to get mixed up with no troopers. Just look what they done to the Comanches this past winter."

"My dear Mr. Ebbly," Holmes said with exasperated patience, "forty years ago President Tyler finally signed the bill admitting Texas to statehood. Under the agreement the U.S. Government was to furnish soldiers for the protection of settlers and ranchers along all Borders and within. As usual among blundering politicians, it took years before any system emerged from the bungling mass of technicalities. And the same rule holds today as it did then—soldiers can *not* go after any person or group until a crime has been committed, and only a crime against the State of Texas or the federal government. Our operations have been solely against individuals, with the poor and lowly redskin receiving the blame as long as possible."

He flicked the ashes from his cigar, piercing eyes roving over intent, bearded faces. He towered above them, a coldly methodical man who could sway other men to his will by sheer personal magnetism. He was in command, and each man there realized it.

"So we shall proceed according to carefully laid plans, Mr. Ferguson. I have already established contact with a number of the bigger commission buyers in Kansas and they'll all be waiting to bid on your first herd and the others to follow."

He talked for ten minutes longer, holding the men spellbound. He was pulling the lever that would start rolling the

machinery of a plan that could have been conceived only by a brilliant mind. These men would scatter and fade away back to their own ranches, some of them a week's ride away, each with a map upon which was marked dates to begin their drives and routes to be taken. Three months of planning by Holmes and now this final big meeting to insure perfect coordination.

After Jeff Holmes finished talking, gallons of black coffee were brought in to be consumed with generous glasses of good whisky. Presently the men began to rise and get into heavy coats and wool caps.

HOLMES impressed on them a final warning. "Remember, men, keep your fast messengers on the trails to make certain there will be no slipup, even if a few of them do get killed now and then. Keep reminding them of the five thousand in gold to the man who brings me Stony Burns's head in a gunnysack."

"Where you going now, Jeff?" a man asked him.

"Back to the one place I'd never be suspected of being in. And because Rube Hankins is an honest man, all messengers will come to me by night and never leave a trace on one foot of his range."

They filed out to their waiting horses. Many men were on guard around the place. A man mounted and rode away, and then another and another, until all were gone. Holmes's dream of years was on the verge of becoming reality.

When the last man was gone, he left the highly respected cattleman by the fire and went into another room with lace curtains at the windows. Lamplight shone on the russet hair of a woman who was reading.

"Well, my dear Irene," he said, "I think I carried that off quite well, don't you?"

"I was reading," she said calmly.

"Impossible." He laughed at her. "No woman ever could read with an ear to a keyhole."

In the early hours of the morning a light coach pulled by a double span of sleek horses trotted away from the ranch to begin a long but leisurely trip northward to the Panhandle country of Texas. Inside the coach two well-dressed people sat bundled warmly in clean buffalo robes—"Mr. and Mrs. Colter."

Through slits in the canvas blinds covering the windows as protection against the morning chill Irene Snyder saw the bobbing outlines of the heavily armed riders acting as guards. Behind trotted a light hack pulled by four wiry mules, the vehicle piled high with bedrolls and elaborate camping equipment. "Mr. Colter," prosperous shipper of cattle by boat to Latin-American republics was, it seemed, allergic to trains and smoke.

Holmes leaned back and lit an after-breakfast cigar, savoring the aroma. Irene finally broke the silence.

"And you are really egotistical enough, Jeff, to believe that you can get away with this fantastic scheme?"

" 'What man can think, man can do,' my dear Irene," he quoted. "I can and shall do it, simply because no other man has possessed the qualities to attempt it. You'll see. The letters you wrote from Mexico, dictated by me, have allayed any fears people up in the Panhandle felt concerning your absence. It must have been quite a blow to Joe Cumberland to receive notice from you discharging him and all those other hands and families left on the ranch. Naturally, the ranch is now in charge of men and women of my own choosing. You will return there and remain, supposedly too busy with the spring roundup to visit in town. You will be under guard night and day. If any visitors drop in, any attempt to tell them the truth will result in action most unfortunate for them."

"My dear Jeff," she said, mocking his own suave tones, "I shall be most obedient to your slightest wish."

"Why?" he snapped back at her, his expansive mood gone.

"For two reasons," she said calmly.

"You didn't take advantage of a helpless woman as so many other men would have done. It was not, of course, from any moral scruples inside of that black brain of yours. It was your colossal vanity which has left me, as they delicately express it, unsullied. So at least I am under obligation to you for that."

"And the other reason?"

"Stony, of course. He's hardcase and lacks many of your exterior fine qualities, but in him are ingrained other qualities that have made him put aside any personal hatred for me and keep on your trail for the ghastly crime you had committed against an innocent woman. She must have suffered horribly!"

He jerked savagely at the door and flung out the cigar, unmindful that it might start a grass fire. Only then did she begin to understand that his dreams may have been haunted night after night as the full horror of what he had done refused to leave his thoughts. She'd heard him pacing the floor, she'd seen him drink more than he should. She had thought it worry and nervous tension over the complicated details of his fantastic plan.

NOW she knew he was haunted by the ghost of a dead woman. She drove the knife in deeper and twisted it cruelly.

"Jeff, do you recall the Bible quotation about 'What profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' Suppose your scheme should succeed? You would take your spoils and Jean, Mrs. Yerkes's daughter, and live happily ever after? I almost hope you do succeed, Jeff. Better punishment in a life-long hell of agony and remorse than a hangman's noose."

"You're the only one who knows," he said harshly. "And you'll never tell after Burns is dead."

"He's from the Nations country, remember," she reminded him. "A prominent man up there, as you found out to

[*Turn page*]

NOW Carhartt's
FAMOUS BROWN DUCK
OVERALLS are SANFORIZED
• THE FITTIN'EST, WEARIN'EST, PROTECTIN'EST WORK CLOTHES EVER MADE FOR THOSE TOUGH HE-MAN JOBS
WON'T SHRINK MORE THAN 1%
Ask for Carhartt Overalls at your favorite dealer
HAMILTON-CARHARTT OVERALL CO
STILL MADE BY THE FAMILY THAT ORIGINATED THEM IN 1889
LOOK FOR THE CAR IN THE HEART!
Carhartt
THE MOST FAMOUS NAME IN WORK CLOTHES

your amazement when you went up to arrange for the bloody deed that still has Texas shuddering."

"And that opened your eyes, too, didn't it, my dear Irene?" he sneered. "You the cattle baroness of the Panhandle and he with huge holdings not too many days' drive to the north. But you'll never get him, not only because he hates you but he won't be alive long enough to see you again."

XV

UP ACROSS the central plains they traveled leisurely and comfortably, and came at last to the Panhandle country. And one night the familiar scattered buildings of the great Snyder ranch loomed up. Irene got out of the coach and heard men who were strangers to her talking with Holmes in low tones. Her home was now an outlaw hangout and she a prisoner. "Any word from Mike or the boys yet?" she heard Holmes ask one of the men.

"Nothing about Burns. He's disappeared complete. Swallowed up—gone like a shadow, Jeff."

"Has Ferguson started his drive yet?"

"Ferguson is dead, Jeff. From all the signs a bunch of tough young Comanche bucks broke away from the Nations again on spring raids and hit his place. Must have been a hell of a fight, but the redskins won it and left the whole place in ashes. Ferguson's wiped out."

"Good God!" Jeff Holmes burst out involuntarily. "Indians? Impossible!"

Then he heard Irene's cool voice beside him. "I think I'll go in and get some rest, darling. Good night, Jeffrey dear." The sound of her mocking laughter floated back.

Half an hour later the outlaw chief was mounted on a fresh horse and leading a pack animal on his way to the cabin where a woman had died. For the first time in his life he was badly shaken, a fear he had never before known creeping through him like the first shiver brought on by a cold wind.

He had underestimated Stony Burns. He himself had taken no chances, even among his own men. Nobody but a few trusted lieutenants knew where he was going to hole up, any messages to be sent through them. Yet the fear of Stony haunted him as did the memory of Mrs. Yerkes and how she had died. But Burns!

He had known that that lone Nemesis was after him, just as almost everybody in Texas knew it. He had shrugged off the various killings of men in his far-flung organization as the work of a few jackals hanging on the outer fringes of where the lions were settling down to begin their big feast on fat cattle herds. But the wiping out of Ferguson's entire outfit and scattering far and wide the stolen cattle was a serious blow portending more of the same by men who also were apparently highly organized.

Two nights later the night riders struck again at a Holmes trail crew ready to start. Alone in the cabin where a woman had died Holmes, in rage, spread out his big map and drew a red circle around the figure "2," for the second scheduled herd. The following night Mike LeFeur rode in on a worn-out horse to report a third fight and the scattering of another gather for the trail northward to Kansas.

Jeff Holmes saddled and began a hard ride to the basin where Stony had fought it out with Cumberland. The next four numbers on the map covered Irene Snyder's ranch, the gather having been going on for days.

He rode through the darkness unaware that a quarter-mile away two men lay in the tall grass, now rich and green, eyes on the pinpoint fire at the wagon down below.

Stony, one of them, was talking with a quiet looking man named Rome Brown, at whose big ranch home not long before more than forty of the ranchers working with Jeff Holmes had listened to their big leader's detailed plans.

"So that's about the way it shapes up," the rancher was saying. "Ferguson

first, followed by Ebbly, and then Van Horn over in Haskel County. The next four to go are from the Snyder woman's ranch. Two herds of three thousand three-year-olds, one of two-year-olds she'd normally hold another year, as well as twenty-four hundred rebranded stuff taken when the Bosque Grande cattle outfit was sacked and burned and the stuff driven here to her place."

Stony said, his eyes on the distant pinpoint of light, "Then she went with him willingly into Mexico last winter, Brown? She's in on this?"

"That's the way it looks to me, Stony."

"Maybe she had no choice. The last thing she said to me after the fight at the line cabin was that she was firing him."

Doubts assailed him, irritating him. He remembered her calmness under fire during the siege by the young Comanche bucks, how much of a real woman she had shown herself to be beneath her arrogant exterior. Would she stay with Holmes all winter, knowing he had gone to see Jean Yerkes twice at the Comanche encampment in Mexico? Was she helpless?

BROWN, the rancher, said, "He might have forced her to go with him in some way, Stony. But it didn't look like it the two weeks he hid out at my place. He was always calling her 'my dear,' and she was always saying, 'Yes, darling,' when anybody was around."

"And now she's back at her own ranch, which is loaded down with tough outlaws. I'd thought of trying to make a night sneak in to see her and maybe kill Holmes at the same time. I guess I don't have to now."

"No," grunted the rancher. "I wouldn't think so, Stony. But that's in your hands. The rest of us ranchers now in the Rangers just take orders from you, our captain. The governor said for you to use your own judgment, and General Miles said for you to call on any troops for any trouble that came under federal regulations—though there ain't none in this case. Well, what you aim to do now? Wipe out this bunch like we did the other three?"

"No," Stony replied softly. "No, Brown, Irene Snyder's cattle will go north unmolested."

"I don't savvy!"

Stony pushed himself upright, brushing at his hands. He looked tall and gaunt against the night skyline. He looked grim, too, for the final installment in squaring a Burns debt to Irene Snyder was about to be paid.

Even in the darkness he could see the puzzled, impatient frown on Brown's face and didn't blame the man. Every Ranger-ranch owner under his command had wanted to sweep down on the Snyder headquarters some night and clean out the nest.

Brown said, "Some of the boys are getting pretty mad, Stony. Sure, sure, I know they're Rangers and must take orders. Only thing is they ain't *used* to being Rangers. They want to clean out that place and maybe see a few fellers get tangled up in their ropes and be plumb accidental strangled."

"I told you before, Rome," Stony said sharply, "that there are at least twenty or thirty women and some children in that outfit. It's bad enough to see a couple of them sprawled in front of a tepee with arrows in them. I certainly don't want to have to look at a dead woman or a couple of kids and know my orders cost their lives. I don't believe the sins of the fathers should be visited upon the kids. I also know that Holmes is not there right now. He rode to the ranch with Irene in style, and I couldn't attack because she was in the coach. That night he disappeared. He's holed up somewhere directing operations. Thanks to that map of yours we stopped Ferguson and Ebbly and Van Horn cold."

"All right," the dogged Brown finally asented. "Like the governor says, you're the boss. What next?"

"I thought you'd have guessed when I sent for you to meet me tonight, Rome. Every man directly under your orders all over northern and central Texas has

a list of ranch owners' names in his district, a total of forty-four. A week from today—giving Holmes and Irene time to get their four big herds strung out a few miles apart on the trail—you'll have them ready to move in and quietly take into custody the ranchers who have listened too well to the man who played upon their greed and is now going to cause their downfall."

"And the woman?"

"Stony said quietly, "I am going to send her to the penitentiary."

"But Holmes," Rome Brown continued in protest. "He—"

"He has to be brought out in the open," Stony cut in sharply. We haven't been able to find the hole he's hiding in yet, but if Irene's herds start unmolested, he'll either be with them or go on ahead to Dodge City with Irene where she can sell the cattle. Wherever he shows up, I'll be there, Rome."

"You might need help to arrest him."

"I'm not going to arrest him," Stony Burns replied. "I'm going to kill him!"

They walked through the lush grass, and Stony picked up the trailing reins of his black gelding, sleek again now, and swung up. Brown, too, went into leather, tension in him almost at the breaking point because of the dangerous game he had elected to play to help bring order and law back among Texas cattlemen. It would be years before some of them could recover from the devastating raids.

STONY rode northward for several miles. He began to whistle a cowboy tune and presently a man rose up almost in front of him.

"Stony?"

"Right. Did the wagon get back yet?"

"Nope. Ought to be in before morning though."

Stony rode on down into a wide gully and came to a small fire where other Rangers were sitting around, talking in low tones and smoking. He unsaddled and turned the black loose and carried his gear to his bedroll near the fire. His eyes instinctively went to the big waterproof tarp strung over a pole to form a tent of sorts for Jean Yerkes. She'd gone straight back to find her father, but Stony had known she'd be playing squarely into Holmes's hands. She had pointed out the bucks who had sacked the line cabin and killed her mother. That would be sufficient evidence, added to what the dying buck had told Stony and Irene Snyder, to hang Holmes; and if the man ever got his hands on Jean again, he would have her killed. He had been certain Jean would never know he had been responsible for her mother's death and he had meant eventually to "buy" her freedom from the Comanches. Unfortunately for him she had learned the truth, so when she had insisted on going to her father, Stony had wired ahead from Serino and had her taken gently but firmly under protection.

He sat down by the fire, rolled a cigarette, then reached into a Dutch oven for a warm biscuit and poured coffee. He munched hungrily, drank the coffee, and followed an age-old Texas camp custom of smoking and talking as he ate.

"Anything new yet, Stony," Rube Hankins asked from across the fire. The Ranger pentacle on his shirt front gleamed in the flickering light.

"I look for them to start tomorrow—not later than the next day."

The Rafter R owner growled, "Guess I'm getting old because I sure will be glad when this busines is finished."

Stony said, "They'll probably cross Ferguson's range, since you won't let them drive across yours. Ferguson's partner, Bledsoe, is either a fool or has a lot of faith in Holmes, for he's rebuilding the ranch and has already rounded up what stolen stock and their own he could find, waiting for Holmes's orders. Give them plenty of time to get across with the Snyder and Bosque Grand stuff, Rube, then exactly one week from tonight you take him into custody."

Hankins gave a short laugh that was more like a satisfied grunt, then as he glanced at the tent where Jean lay asleep, his face sobered. He said, "It's

going to tough on that youngster when the wagon gets here, Stony. She's waited a long time for the reburial of her mother."

"She's strong," Stony answered. "Like her mother was. Listen!"

He raised his head and all eyes turned toward the west. They could hear the rattle of chains and the bumping sound made by a slowly drawn wagon. Presently the team came into view and pulled to a stop with a long covered object covered with a tarp in the bed of the wagon—a carefully made coffin bound by bands of iron.

Ed Yerkes got down heavily from the seat, leaving the undertaker who had been brought from town. He stumbled to the fire and sat down. Stony silently handed him a tin cup of hot coffee and knew that the was was suffering hell as he saw how Yerkes's hands were trembling.

"Steady, Ed," Stony said quietly.

Yerkes said, "I'm all right, Stony. I stayed out on the flats till Jake there and the boys got the job done. Then I went to the cabin for a last look. He'd been there, Stony! He'd been living there, so help me God! Right there where—"

Jean came out of the darkness, placed a hand on her father's shoulder and brushed at hair that had turned white during the past few months.

"It's all right, Ed." she said gently. "We'll take care of everything tomorrow and try to forget. Drink your coffee, Pa. You and Jake still have a long way to go tonight."

XVI

JEAN looked entirely feminine despite the men's clothes she wore. She looked the desirable young woman she was, yet for some reason Stony was always uncomfortable when she was near. Some kind of wall appeared to have grown up between them. Just why, Stony did not know. Unless it was that his mission was not yet accomplished—his vow to kill the man who had hurt her so grievously, coldly and methodically destroy an empire of cow thieves and killers who had let nothing, not even the lives of women and children, stand in the way of cattle wealth unheard of.

Jake Coleman, the undertaker from Plainsville, finished unbitting his mule span and slipping on nosebags of oats. He came to the fire, rubbing his hands to take out the chill. He took the coffee Jean had waiting for him.

"You coming to Plainsville, Stony?" he asked.

"I'll be there, Jake," Stony said grimly.

He *was* there shortly after ten. He and Rube Hankins, minus a badge, Hankins's riders, the brother of the dead owner of the Bosque Grande outfit whose twenty-four hundred head were on Irene Snyder's range ready for the trail, and nine tough-looking, heavily-armed punchers on Bosque Grande horses. Twenty-one grim men who entered the town sprawled out on the Texas plain rode up the main street, a tight-lipped group with eyes on the hitch-racks for signs of Snyder horses. Not one, however, did they see. But armed men who rode horses with brands unknown around Plainsville lounged on the street and eyed the cavalcade warily.

"He wouldn't try it, Stony," Rube Hankins said as the two jogged side by side out in front.

His eyes searching ceaselessly, Stony replied, "He's a bold man, Rube, with armed men to back him up in a town where law don't mean much under present conditions. But I was thinking of Irene. The Yerkeses put in a good many years at the ranch before Colonel Snyder died."

They dismounted in a body, and all, except two of the Bosque Grande punchers and two of Hankins's Rafter R riders, went into the big Palace Saloon. The men outside took up positions on each side of the wide door. Inside, some of the men ordered soft drinks. Stony sat down and idly fingered a stack of red checkers. There was no hurry. Jean was

under the protective guns of good men. The grave was being dug in the cemetery. An hour passed.

One of Hankins's men came through the front door, looked at Stony and the big rancher, and silently jerked his head. They went out on the porch and looked down the street.

A half whistling sound came from Hankins's big nose. "By hell," he said softly, "I never thought she'd have the nerve to do it. And the two of them—*together!*" A hard oath broke from his lips.

The four-horse light coach was coming at a rapid pace. Stony saw Irene then, saw the startled look on her face, then Jeff Holmes's bearded profile came into view as the coach passed, followed by a dozen heavily-armed riders. One of them was Mike LeFeur.

"No, sir," Hankins said again as though he still couldn't believe what he had seen, "I never thought she'd have nerve enough to do it!"

The coach clattered up in front of the Cattlemen's Hotel & Bar and all of them trooped inside, including the armed riders. Presently a barefooted boy came trotting to the Palace with a note clutched in one hand and a bright fifty-cent piece in the other. He came straight to where Stony sat with Rube Hankins.

"The man say give this note to Mr. Burns," he said. "You-all are him, ain't you?"

Stony nodded, took the note, and read it. He rose.

"Irene?" asked Hankins.

"Holmes," Stony said drily. "He wants to talk with me."

"You reckon this is a trap?" The rancher promptly began to pull himself to his feet.

"I don't think so, Rube. Not on the day of Mrs. Yerkes's funeral and me with twenty good men at my back. He knows it would mean a fight that even the governor wouldn't ignore. He's too intelligent to start anything here today. You stay here, Rube, and remind anybody who gets fighting ideas that they're a company of Texas Rangers under my direct orders."

HE MADE his way unhurriedly toward the Cattlemen's Hotel & Bar. The town was quiet, no women on the streets where once Ed Yerkes and his wife had been familiar figures. A lone dog with ribs showing through her rough coat and twin rows of milk dugs sagging below her lank belly trotted ahead as Stony moved on.

A short, worried-looking man of fifty-five or so stepped out from a doorway with a sawed-off Greener slung across one arm. Shoosh McKelvey, the sheriff.

"Wait a minute, Burns!" he said sharply. "Where you going?"

"To the hotel," Stony replied curtly. "To see Jeff Holmes."

"The hell you are! There'll be no killing in this town on the day of Edna Yerkes's funeral. You just shoosh right back down the street and stay there—and that goes for anybody else coming this way."

"It's all right, Sheriff. He sent a note that he wants to talk. He'll make no trouble with me, and you can depend on it that I'll start none with him."

"All right." The harried officer finally nodded. "But I'll just go along to make certain."

They went on to the hotel, and Shoosh McKelvey said, "Go in ahead of me, Burns."

Stony entered the spacious lobby of the big red brick building. Irene rose from a chair back of a tall green plant in a five-gallon tin can. Then Holmes was beside her, and Stony found himself face to face with the man he had hunted for months.

Those months had brought an astonishing transformation in the big Holmes. He seemed to have grown in stature, filled out around the shoulders. His short brown beard, freshly combed, glistened below piercing eyes. In an immaculate gray suit, he emanated sheer power and a virility that was almost awe-inspiring. Small wonder,

Stony thought, that otherwise honest men had been swayed and brought under his control. It was easier, standing there facing the man, to understand now why such a vast far-flung empire of thieving had been created and had turned a good portion of central and northern Texas into a veritable outlaw domain. Holmes was the personification of the bold leader who had made it reality.

Irene, in a brocaded satin dress with a small bustle, extended a slim hand. She was lovely, standing there beside the man who had almost brought about her death.

"It's good to see you again, Stony," she murmured. "You've been gone a long time."

He sensed something in her eyes—a message, a hundred things she wanted to tell him. Probably excuses, in an attempt to extenuate what had happened since that cold day they had fought Indians, he thought bitterly.

He said shortly, "You're looking well." And to Jeff Holmes: "Well?"

Holmes laughed, his white teeth gleaming through mustache and beard. "Hardly the fond greeting you have been hoping for, I have no doubt, my dear Irene. Let's go upstairs, Burns, where we can talk."

"You go ahead of me," Stony said softly. "It's bad enough to have my back to the front door and the street without you added to the pack."

"My dear fellow," Holmes said goodnaturedly, "you're safer here than in any other place in town."

"You can bet he is!" cut in Shoosh McKelvey, the Greener still cradled in his arm. "I'll wait right here, Burns. Now shoosh on upstairs and remember, no trouble."

Holmes smiled again and, with Irene beside him, ascended the carpeted stairs. She flashed him an appealing look. It made him suddenly angry, yet puzzled.

The two rooms facing the street on a corner, with an open door dividing them, were the best the hotel had to offer. Stony went in, stepped to the window and looked down. Hankins and the other men were bunched in a tight little group on the saloon porch. Some of Holmes's guard were loping off toward the lower part of town, drawn by the magnet of liquor in the Mexican cantinas there.

"Sit down, Burns," Holmes snapped impatiently, his good humor gone. "I told you there would be no trouble."

STONY drawled, "There will be if those men of yours keep on heading for Mexicantown. You know what Mexican liquor does to some white men—they might as well be smoking marijuana."

"My men don't disobey orders," Holmes said and settled into a comfortable chair. He reached for a panatela and nodded toward a box of them on a table.

Stony sat down with his hat across his knees.

"You can start talking any time," he said.

The outlaw leader finished lighting his cigar first. He blew out a cloud of smoke and watched it roll toward the ceiling.

"All right, Burns." He studied the tip of the cigar between his fingers. "During the past several months I've been forming an organization for raising and shipping cattle on a large scale in order to cut down costs by pooling. Not the operation of one single small ranch such as Irene's—a mere six hundred and forty square miles of land—but a series of other ranches, a corporation that eventually will cover all or most of Texas and surrounding territories, once it is firmly established and methods of flawless execution worked out."

"I like that part," Stony said drily. "The execution."

"I'm referring to business, not personalities. Unfortunately, you also appear to have been busy on your own, and the results are beginning to appear inimical to my best interests. Since I abhor

personal violence, I thought it expedient to come to Plainsville today, reasonably certain that the funeral of the unfortunate Mrs. Yerkes would bring you here and perhaps allows us an opportunity to sit down like intelligent men and talk things over. I did so in a sincere desire to prevent bloodshed if you attempt to stop or scatter any more of my herds."

"He's really a very, very worried man, aren't you, dear?" Irene cut in smilingly. "You see, Stony, you're still alive, despite Jeff's offer of five thousand in gold to any man who brings your head to him in a sack. And when the weekly paper, *The Plainsville Herald,* was put beside his breakfast plate this morning, he was so unhappy to read that immediately after the funeral Mr. Ed Yerkes and his daughter, Jean, will be leaving on the afternoon train to make a new home in Dodge City. You'd better have her guarded well, Stony."

"She is," he said coldly.

"And it was all my fault, Stony," she whispered, and he saw her shudder. "I forced Ed to keep his family up there because I was angry at you and you wanted them to go. I did it out of spite, Stony."

"She did it because she's in love with you, Burns." Holmes laughed softly.

"It was still my fault," Irene said.

"No." Stony shook his head. "You had no way of knowing that your ranch manager, already deep in his plans for sweeping half the cattle out of Texas, had sent young bucks down to kidnap Jean and finish me off at the other line cabin twenty miles away. It was a terrible tragedy, Irene, but fortunately all but one of the intended victims escaped. There are still three of us left whose testimony can hang the man responsible."

"I'll never hang, Burns." Holmes grinned at Stony.

"No, you won't hang, because I'm going to kill you. I let Cumberland escape with his life because the body of Mrs. Yerkes was inside the cabin. And now the woman you had murdered so brutally and savagely is saving your life simply because she's over in the undertaker's parlor."

"Have you seen Joe since then, Stony?" Irene asked.

"Not a sight of him. Much to my surprise."

"Easy to explain, Burns." Jeff Holmes removed the cigar from his mouth. "He was, of course, madly in love with the beautiful but somewhat cold owner of the fabulous Snyder holdings, and it must have broken his heart when he received a letter from her, discharging him and all the old hands except certain ones I could trust. He pictured her in my arms and silently slunk away to nurse a broken heart."

"Stop it, Jeff!" Irene said sharply. "One scream from me, and you'll be a dead man in that chair, and the streets of this town will be filled with gunfire!"

"One scream from you, my dear, and the man behind that curtain in your room with a sawed-off shotgun lined on Burns's chest will blow him through a window!"

XVII

HOLMES rose to his feet, the piercing look in his eyes icy. His brief good humor was gone for good. Again he was the bold leader of unknown numbers of outlaws scattered throughout Texas for hundreds of miles. The man who believed he held a good portion of the whole Texas cattle kingdom in the palm of his hand.

He said, "My reason for calling you here, Burns, was to lay some facts before you. Now that Irene has been in such a hurry to tell you how much she loves you and that she's still pure, I'll lay those facts before you. Not long ago a man named Ferguson started a drive to Kansas. He lost his life and his cattle before he got started. Two other men named Ebbly and Van Horn tried to follow and through escaping with their lives, they lost everything to night riders who also were good with torches

around chuckwagons and such. Today three more of the herds under my direction have started up the trail." He sneered at Stony. "And all of them stuff raised on the Snyder holdings. They're her cattle, Burns, and you'd better not try to stop them."

"I have no intention of attacking them," Stony replied. "What about Bosque Grandé stuff?"

"There are no Bosque Grandé cattle there. Nothing but Snyder."

"Since you blotted and road--branded. Never mind. Your cattle are safe from attack by me, Irene."

She gave him such a look of pure dismay that it was plain she'd been depending upon him to fight.

"Then that's settled," Jeff Holmes said. "And fortunate for you and your riffraff, Burns. Twenty regular drovers are with each herd and twenty more riding outguard. Forty men with each, and none of the herds more than a few miles apart. It'll cost you one hundred and twenty fighting men to scatter those herds, Burns."

Stony had come to his feet. Through the doorway leading to Irene's room he saw boot toes below the curtain. He said to Irene, "Will you be at the funeral?"

"I—I think not, Stony," she said.

"I see."

"You don't see anything," Jeff Holmes snapped. "After I took over the management of the ranch, following the death of Colonel Snyder and began to lay plans for expansion all over Texas, I helped to make her cold and aloof. To attend the funeral now would be a sign of weakness."

Stony felt his right hand clench until his fingernails shot pain through his hand. He weighed his chances against the shotgun, then remembered Mrs. Yerkes.

"So it's agreed then?" Holmes asked. "You'll not attack the Snyder herds?"

"The Snyder herds will not be attacked."

"Then there'll be no trouble here in Plainsville. I'll get word to the men right away."

Stony went downstairs to the lobby. Shoosh McKelvey was in conversation with the clerk and was obviously much relieved to see Stony. But he froze as three shadows darkened the doorway—Mike LeFeur and two other men. The black-bearded little breed was grinning, hand like a claw over the butt of his gun.

"Five t'ousand dollars in gold. And, by tam, my gun she got de straight hammer pin now, *le magnifique!*"

His right hand swooped for the heavy .45 caliber Colt. Stony thought he heard Shoosh McKelvey yell, then he felt the worn butt of his own .44 kicking hard against the palm of his hand.

He shot fast and with deliberation. He drove the first bullet squarely into the center of the bristly black beard while the other two owlhoots, unprepared for the alacrity with which the breed had gone into action, got their own weapons working. Orange flashes and smoke spurted, and windows rattled to the crash of gunfire.

Stony heard boots thumping above and wheeled around as a man with a shotgun leaped into view at the head of the stairs. Then came the heavy roar of Shoosh McKelvey's buckshot-loaded weapon, and the man up there buckled in the middle and rolled down the stairs into the lobby.

THE hammer on Stony's gun clicked three times at Jeff Holmes before he realized the gun was empty.

McKelvey roared, "I told you what would happen, Holmes!"

"I know nothing about this," the outlaw shouted. "I had nothing to do with it!"

"Let him go, Sheriff," Stony said sharply. "I doubt if he did."

He was slamming out empties and shoving in new loads as he ran for the doorway and jumped through over three bodies in the opening. Men had flung themselves into saddles and were coming hard from the Palace, Hankins in the lead and cursing like a madman.

Stony ran out and waved his arms to stop them, and they showered him with dirt as horses were yanked to a halt in the sunshine.

"It's all right!" Stony yelled. "Get back to the Palace. Quick—before more Holmes men get here!"

"Not by a damned sight!" roared Hankins. "They wanted a fight and they're going to get one! Come on, boys — We're going to clean this town of scum!"

Holmes came dashing from the hotel as his riders over beyond the railroad tracks hit saddles and spurred into a run with guns in their hands. Shoosh McKelvey, with a reloaded shotgun, stood back of Holmes with his deadly weapon leveled at the men who slowed to a halt before the hotel.

They sat there, two groups of armed men, guns in their hands and their blood hot, aching to fight, filled with a fierce joy at the opportunity.

"Steady, men!" Stony warned coldly. "Turn around and ride back—slow."

"I'm not moving one damned inch!" Hankins bellowed. "Back down for *them?* Let the cow-stealing bastards start something. *Any time!*" he challenged like a rumbling old range bull pawing up dirt.

"You stand fast, Rube," Shoosh McKelvey yelled back at him angrily. "One more yap out of you, and I'm going to crawl up there in that saddle and wrap this lead sprayer around your fool neck!"

"You and how many more badge packers?" bawled Hankins belligerently, then grinned sheepishly, remembering that he himself was carrying a badge pinned out of sight inside his shirt.

"Get going, men," Jeff Holmes ordered curtly and jerked his thumb. "I said there would be no trouble and I wanted none. Mike disobeyed and paid with his life for his stupidity. Good riddance. Get him and the other two over to Jake's. This is a terrible thing to happen on this of all days."

"Yes, ain't it?" growled the Rafter R owner and spat out an oath of disgust and disappointment. "Come on, boys. Back to the Palace. Coming, Stony?"

"He's coming," Shoosh McKelvey said ominously, then commented querulously, "Hell of a note. I'm too old and lazy to punch cows any more. I ain't got enough money to go into business, even if I knowed how, which I don't, and this *would* have to be election year."

"Never mind," Hankins jeered. "You can always go to work for me on the hooligan wagon during roundups."

Somebody snickered, and someone else broke into loud laughter. It broke the tension, and Hankins led his men away. Stony and the sheriff walked together along the board walk.

Stony said, "I'm mighty sorry about this on account of Jean and her father, Sheriff."

"Hell, you couldn't help it. I was there and saw it. Damned lucky I was, too."

"It was for me. Thanks."

"I'm bound by law to arrest you, Burns, but I'll be damned if I'm going to, election or no election. I'll probably get beat anyhow," he added gloomily.

"I don't think so. Look, Sheriff."

McKelvey stared at what lay in Stony's palm. "You?" he whispered. "Ranger captain, eh? And the others are Rangers, too? Why the hell didn't you tell me? I'd have let you clean out the whole bunch."

"And lost the lives of some good men, even if they have been aching for a good fight? I'm under secret orders from the Governor to handle it the way I think best.—Look, Sheriff, here comes Jean."

SHE was running to meet him, as she had come running once before when gunfire had blasted through a Texas town.

"It seems," she panted, "that every time we are in a town together—"

"It's all right, Jean," he told her gently. "LeFeur and two others. I'll be leaving at once. If I was worried about Irene's safety when she disappeared, I'm twice as much worried now about

the danger she's in after something happened here today."

"I see." He knew what she was thinking but could not tell her what he intended to do. The wall between them that was another woman was higher now than ever before.

"Very well, Stony. Then you won't be here for—this afternoon?"

"I think it's better if I leave now, Jean."

She turned away, and Stony watched her go with four armed men strolling along unobtrusively near by.

And out on the plain a mile east of town a long line of cattle, accompanied by many more riders than was usual on such a drive, moved fast on the way north. Farther in the distance was another, and still another.

The Snyder trail herds were on the way.

At daylight the next morning Jeff Holmes awoke in his big bed in response to a sharp but respectful knock on his hotel room door. He yawned, smiled amusedly at Irene's locked door between the two rooms, and went to the hall door. He had taken the entire upper floor for his men, many of them on guard through the night, two with a fire-axe stationed at Irene's door. He had taken no chances that Stony would attempt a rescue during the night.

Holmes opened the door and confronted a rider who obviously had been up most or all of the night.

"Come in, Saunders," Holmes said and then reached down to pick up a fresh copy of *The Plainsville Herald,* published tri-weekly.

He tossed it on the bed, yawned, and ran his fingers through his brown beard. The muscles of his body, naked to the waist, rippled smoothly. He said impatiently, "Well?"

"Not a hitch, Jeff. We got the Bosque Grandé stuff going right after dark and kept on pushing them but swinging over to the east like you said. It's a longer route than due north, but it'll be just another of the trail herds beginning to crawl northward from all over Texas."

Holmes picked up the pitcher and poured water into the bowl. He asked, "Just exactly how far is it on this due north route?"

Saunders was rolling a cigarette. He said, "Just about two hundred and sixty miles as a crow flies to Dodge City, including fifty miles across the Strip of Oklahoma between the Panhandle line and the southern boundary of Kansas."

"Get back and keep close contact among the herds. Burns said he wouldn't attack, and that means he won't. It also means he has something else up his sleeve we don't know about. But I'll meet that contingency when it arises."

Saunders left, and Holmes knocked sharply on Irene's bedroom door. "Hurry, my dear," he called through. "We'll be leaving soon."

"Yes, darling," came her mocking voice from the other side of the door. She knew he was more worried than he pretended and she had full confidence in Stony Burns.

He finished dressing and picked up the newspaper, glossing over the details of yesterday's funeral until he came to the last paragraph. That informed the public that it was the intention of Ed Yerkes and his daughter Jean to open a restaurant in Dodge City.

XVIII

RISING from his chair, Jeff Holmes tossed aside the paper and frowned. Some instinct had flashed a warning into his fertile brain. Something was wrong, and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. Something was missing that he should have seen. Through the Indians who had held Jean captive at his orders she had discovered irrefutable proof of his guilt in the massacre of her mother, proof that could be backed up by Irene and Stony Burns. Yet Jean had not gone to the authorities and she was being protected by a man Holmes was beginning to fear more as each day passed.

He put his thoughts aside and went to breakfast. Two hours later the coach was on its leisurely way across the Great Plains country in the wake of the passing herds. He had a feeling that if trouble came, it would be at the line.

Burns, he realized a little uneasily, was from the Nations country. He'd told Holmes he was going to kill him. But he was playing cat-and-mouse until Irene could be taken from him, Holmes, without danger of her being killed?

Holmes sat in the comfortable coach that day as it rocked along, smoking somewhat moodily and angry at himself for his thoughts. Saunders already had been sent on ahead to Dodge to attend to Jean so that she would no longer be a menace to Holmes. Once the three Snyder herds were sold and the money collected, Irene would suffer a regretable accident. A good rifle in the hands of a good man would take care of Stony Burns. And the Bosque Grandé herd could be put through under scores of guns.

It was perfect. It was alomst too perfect, and Jeff Holmes was worried.

The three herds moved on across the Great Plains, heading for the Oklahoma boundary one hundred and sixty miles away. No storms, no bad rain-swollen rivers to cross. The land was flat and because of winter storms, followed by spring freshets, the grass was belly-high and green. The herds could be grazed for two hours, then pushed forward rapidly by the heavily armed riders.

At two o'clock on a bright, cloudless day, a horseman who had been riding far in advance loped back to where the coach was pacing the point of the lead herd. Holmes got out of the coach as the rider pulled up on a sweaty horse.

"The line is just up there a couple of miles, Jeff, he boomed.

"Well?"

"No soldiers or cowpunchers in sight. Just a bunch of Indians scattered around. Looks like they might be waiting."

"Burns's redskin friends, eh? So they're going to stampede us and if we fight, that brings in the cavalry. I guess I overlooked that one."

Irene's voice said beside him, "Stony said he wouldn't attack, Jeff."

"Well—" the big man shrugged—"nothing to do but try. Tell the boys to push them on across, and we'll see what happens."

To his astonishment nothing at all happened. The herds crossed the boundary line into Oklahoma Territory and began the fifty-mile walk across the Strip toward Kansas while Indians watched from high vantage points, then silently faded away. Not a single chief appeared and demanded "Whoa-haws" to eat in exchange for Indian grass. When the three herds were bedded down within a mile of each other, Holmes could stand the suspense no longer.

As he went to change his clothes, preparatory to riding, he heard harsh voices in strident command, the rattle of bit chains and leather, and stepped outside his tent to confront about forty riders led by Stony. Holmes loosed the .45 Colt in the sheath and strode forward.

"What the hell are you doing here, Burns?" he demanded harshly to cover his sudden apprehension.

Stony swung down and moved into the circle of firelight. He ignored Irene.

He said, "I told you I wouldn't attack and I'm keeping my word. There will be no fight—here. But you're on my lease of four hundred and forty sections of Indian land and grass. You'll have to pay. One dollar a head."

Holmes began to laugh. "Is *that* all? We'll pay gladly, Burns. I thought at first you had foolish ideas about riding in here to rescue Irene."

"You've been under observation," was the cold reply. "Comanche friends of mine have crawled to within ten feet and listened. No, I want to know about that Bosque Grandé herd you've tried to slip through. The brother of the dead owner of that herd was in Plainsville

the day Mike LeFeur tried to collect your bounty money on my head, along with a number of his men, all carrying Texas Ranger badges and under my command. Working in secrecy under direct orders of the governor."

HOLMES eyes began to get that piercing look again. He understood much now. He'd thought the angry voices of outraged voters along the Rio Grande would have prevented the chief executive from pulling the Rangers off the Border. But again he had underestimated an enemy.

"I won't be stopped, Burns!" his voice rang out. "The herd goes through."

"Only the Snyder cattle," was Stony's reply. "From the northwest corner of the Panhandle to the northeast corner is a distance of approximately one hundred and seventy miles. From that corner due south on the eastern boundary of the Panhandle and the Oklahoma line is another one hundred and thirty miles. I have in my pocket papers giving me a lease on a one-hundred-foot strip of Indian land all the way across the top of Texas and down the east side of the Panhandle—three hundred miles."

"I'm afraid I misjudged you rather badly, Burns," Jeff Holmes said sardonically and glanced down at Irene. "Did we not, my dear? I believe he once told you that he always squares up his debts. Remember that day Joe Cumberland beat him up at your orders? Well, my sweet, I suggest that you pay him. Let this be another of the lessons I've tried to teach you—that a business woman cannot afford to let her heart rule her head."

He grinned at Stony, the fear gone from him now. A fast rider could be dispatched to turn back and hold the Bosque Grandé stuff until Stony Burns could be put out of the way.

"In other words, Burns, if Irene pays you eight thousand dollars, we are in the clear?"

"As far as these three herds are concerned. As for the Bosque Grandé stuff, stolen and rebranded with the Snyder road brand, the felony was compounded on her ranch, and I have a warrant for her arrest."

"In Oklahoma," sneered Holmes and laughed. "Couldn't you think up a better one to get her away from here and into your arms?"

"This is an Oklahoma warrant with a badge to back it up," Stony said coldly. "I have forty men against your hundred and twenty. But if you fight, you'll eventually be wiped out."

"Get out, Burns!" Holmes roared. "Get going before I give the signal. Look at them! Look at what's around you!"

Stony glanced at nearly a hundred men who were standing rigidly in the lights from fires, most of them with thumbs hooked in cartridge belts and eying the closely packed group of riders sitting their saddles.

"Men," Stony called, "this outfit's cattle will not be molested and there will be no fight if it can be avoided. But one thing I have to tell you. The entire Oklahoma line is guarded by soldiers and Indians. The Bosque Grandé herd now being driven toward it will run into a wall of law backed up by guns. Trailing them from behind to hem them in are more than a hundred other men led by Bosque Grandé riders, carrying the badges of Texas Rangers and my orders to capture or kill."

He turned back to Holmes, and his voice carried so that every man with the herds could hear clearly.

"Holmes, you're done for! Rome Brown, the rancher at whose ranch house you gave final orders to begin the big drive from all over Texas, was sent by me to join your organization of rancher thieves. A duplicate of his map, with the names of owners and the dates to begin their drives, is in my possession. A list of forty-six men has been given to other cattlemen carrying badges. Today Rangers like Rome Brown and Rube Hankins moved in on them. At this very moment they're all either

dead or in chains. Your cow thief empire is wiped out and you're alone!"

Jeff Holmes still could think fast. He spun in a flash and had Irene in front of him with the long barrel of the new type Colt .45 six-shooter shoved hard against her back.

He roared at Stony and his men, "You can get me, sure, but you'll have a dead woman on your hands. One move, and I'll blow her apart!"

He began half dragging her to the saddled horse tied at the back of the coach. Still holding her he got into leather in semidarkness and a grunt went out of the animal as a big heel drove a spur deep into its side. It lunged, and from Holmes's right hand a lash of flame spurted out with the heavy roar of a six-shooter. A woman's scream, a thunder of hoofs as Stony's men plunged away in pursuit, then all died into silence as Stony knelt over Irene while other men crowded around.

STONY put his coat beneath her head while the red stain on her white dress spread. She always wore white dresses, the vagrant thought came to him from nowhere.

"Irene," he whispered, bending over her. "I tried not to fight. But he outthought me. And I didn't mean it about charging you for your cattle. You were welcome to cross my land."

"Stony," she said faintly. "I—I made a bad mistake. Could you forgive me?"

"Nothing to forgive. We'll get you to my ranch."

The red was spreading wider on her white dress, and he was helpless in the face of something beyond his knowledge. She shook her head and half-smiled at him.

"Don't bother. I—Stony, I put up the head—stone."

"Get out of my way!" snarled a voice from beside Stony, and a rough hand shoved him violently aside as a man in a big apron knelt on knees showing through his ragged trousers.

"Who are you, mister?" Stony asked.

"I'm a cook," came the snarling reply from a toothless old man with a long beak nose. "But I used to be the best damned gunshot wound expert in the Confederate Army before I drunk up all the alcohol in the dispensary. Get!"

Stony got to his feet, walked to one of the fires and stood there warming himself against the spring night's chill he didn't feel. His work was actually about done, and suddenly he felt tired. He heard men moving, their leather chaps rustling—saw bearded faces with shifting eyes as two men ran by him carrying a cauldron of hot water and a battered black case that once might have passed for a surgeon's kit.

A man scuffed uneasily at the grass with a boot toe and finally looked straight at Stony.

"You reckon them boys of your'n will run Jeff down?" he asked hesitantly.

Stony shrugged. He said, "They're good men. Some of them are Texans who knew Colonel Snyder long before they went to work for me up here."

"But just supposing they don't get him?"

Again a shrug. "He thinks he's killed Irene Snyder, one of the three people who have proof that he was responsible for the atrocity murder of Mrs. Yerkes down in Texas last winter. Jean Yerkes and I are the other two. If he goes to Dodge City after her, he'll find specially picked soldiers under the command of a Lieutenant Hagerman waiting to pick him up. He'll be tried and hung, and that will end the matter."

"Maybe," cut in a rather hard-faced man across the fire. Plain desperado was written all over his unshaven face.

Stony already had sensed that most of these men were cowpunchers who had followed the example of the cattlemen for whom they had worked and had turned crooked to reap sudden wealth in mass cattle theft under Holmes's leadership. But men like the one who had just spoken were ruthless outlaws who had nothing to lose.

"Maybe," he said again. "He's got

more brains than all of us others put together. If he get's away, he'll start all over again some place else, and he won't get caught flat-footed again, either."

The puncher scuffing away with his boot toe spoke up. "Where you think we ought to go, mister?"

Stony said coldly, "Down in the Governor's office in Austin is a document containing forty-six pages. At the head of each page is the name of a rancher who is now either dead or in chains. Below his name are the names of all the men who worked for him—meaning that all or most of you are on those lists. The state either hasn't much money to spend or they figured you didn't rate running down, because the reward for you that will be posted publicly as soon as I send a telegram will be only fifty dollars each—dead or alive. If you go back, it's only a matter of time until you're caught. Officers all through Kansas have copies of those same lists. So you can't go back, or go north, and you can't go east through the Nations country. There's only one route you can take out of this Strip and that's west into New Mexico Territory where old Vic, the Mescalero Apache, has joined up with the Jicarillos and the Coyoteros to raid and burn the northern section of the state. But if you're here by morning—"

"I won't be. Jeff shot a woman and that's enough for me. Well, boys, so long. I'm sloping back to the second herd to get my warbag and tell the others on night guard."

XIX

PUSHING through the crowd that had collected, Stony saw another and then another follow the puncher who was on his way. Hoofbeats began to sound in the night as men sloped away, and in minutes only fifteen men remained—the hard-core desperados. They had little or nothing to lose and were willing to take a chance on their lives. And he was alone among them, except for three of his own men.

The desperado who wouldn't believe that Jeff Holmes would hang—his name was Slade—was fingering his gun butt when a snarl came from behind, and the beak-nosed cook pushed his way through.

"Get the hell back from my fire, you damned cow wrastlers!" he barked angrily and glared. "The bullet went clean through, mister, and missed the lung. She bled plenty but I didn't have no alcohol to stop infection—" He bellowed at Stony, "All right, I drunk it up!"

"Can she be moved?"

"Not in no coach. She's unconscious but it's infection I'm worried about. The Confederacy lost three hundred and sixty thousand men during the war. Three out of five didn't die in battle. Infection and disease."

Stony turned and confronted Slade. "Get two of your men on fast horses and send them three miles east of here to the first big draw," he ordered. "They'll find a buffalo hide tepee in a camp. Mine. Have them bring back two of the lodge poles for a travois between two of the wagon teams. My ranch is not far from here, and there's a squaw there who has herb remedies. Hurry!"

A little more than two hours later fifteen mounted men with hard, determined faces, and three other men on foot moved through the night across the Oklahoma plain. One man held the bridle of a horse he led carefully. Fifteen feet back of him another of Stony's men held the bridle of another horse. Slung into the harness were the ends of two long poles, and lying in the buffalo hide fastened to them was an unconscious woman. Beside her walked Stony Burns.

The little cavalcade passed Indian lodges and went on across flat, grassy country until lights began to show ahead. Buildings and sheds and corrals loomed up, and the travois stopped before a big, rambling ranch house of solid stone walls and heavy timbers supporting a

shake-shingle gabled roof. While the men dismounted and Slade gave curt orders in a low voice to his men, the travois was disengaged and carried to the long front porch. The door opened, and Stony saw Jean Yerkes standing there.

Her eyes went to the muffled figure sunk deep in the sag of the buffalo robe. She looked at the white, silent face with closed eyes.

"Is she dead, Stony?"

"No, Jean. I must get old Tucona right away. Holmes shot her at his camp and got away. The boys are after him."

"And these men? I've never seen any of them before."

"They're the toughest of Holmes's crew, still standing by under the leadership of a badman named Slade. The ranch is in their hands, Jean, and so are we."

"And where do you think Jeff might go, Stony?" she asked.

"He thinks Irene is dead, meaning that one witness who could hang him is out of the way. My guess is that he's headed straight for Dodge City after the second one."

"Then he took the bait you planted in the Plainsville Hotel—about Ed and me going up there to open a restaurant?"

Stony said grimly, "He took it, Jean. And when he gets there, he'll find Lieutenant Hagerman and some of his boys waiting to take *him*."

After a time Slade, the outlaw still loyal to Jeff Holmes re-entered the house, following a round of inspection among the men he had stationed on guard. Stony, sitting in the kitchen, was drinking coffee served by a pretty Indian girl who spoke English though brokenly. She was the daughter of a white woman who, many years before, had been taken captive from a farm along the Nueces. Slade clumped in and sat down, removing his hat. He looked thoughtfully at Stony and Jean, then ordered the Indian girl to bring coffee.

"You look a bit uncertain which way to jump," Stony said coolly. "I don't blame you, mister. Whether the boys get Jeff or not, they'll be back, and that means a siege while help is sent for."

"Maybe," was the dogged reply. "They ain't got him yet, but *I've* got the three witnesses who could testify against him."

STONY said sharply, "Don't be a damned fool, Slade! If you stay here, you hang or get shot regardless of what you do." He leaned forward, speaking earnestly. "Slade, the greatest killer in Texas today, as you probably know, is John Wesley Hardin, now hiding out somewhere, supposedly in Louisiana or Alabama, after escaping jail two years ago while held on a murder charge. There's a four-thousand-dollar reward on his head, dead or alive, and a thousand self-appointed detectives trying to collect it. If there is a four-thousand-dollar reward on the head of a man like him, how much do you suppose Governor Richard Coke has already offered for Holmes?"

"I ain't heard anything."

"You will when I get to a telegraph station with the information that the ringleaders of Jeff Holmes's cattle thieving empire are dead or captured, their men scattered. The reward has already been appropriated from a special fund set aside for just that purpose by Governor Coke. With word from me that the leaders are all out of the way, the notice will immediately be made public. It's five thousand, Slade. Five thousand dollars in Texas gold!" Stony added softly, "It might get you a clean slate with the law, Slade, but you better think fast. My boys will be back, either with Holmes or without him."

An elderly heavy-set squaw dressed in a buckskin blouse, calico skirt, and moccasins padded into the room and spoke in Comanche. "She will sleep much now. Be sick a long time."

Stony said in the same tongue, "When you leave, tell your bucks that evil men are here in the house. Say that He-Who-

Buys-Grass wants soldiers quickly."

The woman padded out, and Slade took the coffee cup, his eyes on the Indian girl's lithe body.

Stony said sharply, "You haven't much time, Slade. Better keep your mind on saving your hide."

"Five thousand, you say?" Slade muttered. "Where do you suppose he'd head for if he got away from them men of your'n in the darkness?"

"Dodge City, of course. He thinks that Jean is there with her father."

"Can you get me clear if I collect his scalp?"

Stony shook his head. "That's in Governor Coke's hands, Slade. All I can do is collect the money and mail it to you."

Slade put down the untasted coffee and rose to his feet. "All right, you win, Burns," he said in sudden decision. "Better to take a small chunk than try to get the whole hog. How far from here is Dodge?"

"About eighty-five or ninety miles."

"I'll tell the boys to meet me in New Mexico, some place where I ain't going to go. I'll need a fresh horse, too."

He left the house, and within minutes the ranch was deserted. Stony got up and reached for the cartridge belt he'd hung on the back of his chair.

Jean said gently, "Haven't you risked enough, Stony? You've won and you have her here now."

"The only description of him Lieutenant Hagerman has is that of a clean-shaven, well-dressed man," Stony said. "I've got to be sure. Jeff Holmes isn't like that now."

He went out into the night, took the horse that had been led from the cow camp where Irene had almost been murdered to the corral, saddled a fresh mount and rode it northward. He cut a wide circle to beat Slade to the Kansas town. He thought he knew Slade. He'd meet Holmes, come under the man's power again, and side him against the soldiers.

At nine o'clock the next morning a worn-out horse and a tired rider came out of the prairie country past herds of cattle waiting turns at the loading pens, and entered town. Stony left the horse in a livery, walked to a café on the main street, and ate breakfast. He'd been in the saddle almost continuously for twenty-nine hours without sleep. After breakfast he headed for a small hotel for two hours of sleep.

He thought he had no more than dropped off to sleep when a loud knocking on his door brought him hazily awake again. Instinctively he reached for his six-shooter dangling on the head of the iron bedstead. The knocking came again, loud and commanding, and he heard Jean's voice.

"Stony, wake up. Hurry!"

HE LEAPED to the door, unlatched it, and swung it wide. Her eyes were anxious, filled with abject apology as though she expected censure. One of his own men followed, a tall, serious-faced fellow who once had been a Texas deputy sheriff near Austin.

"What is it, Oscar?" Stony demanded.

Oscar nodded in the general direction of the street. "He's in town, Stony. As soon as we seen he was headed for here last night, one of the boys high-tailed to the ranch to let you know. The rest of us come on. You was already gone when the messenger got to the ranch."

"Where is he?" Stony asked quietly. He sat down and began to draw on a boot. He had removed only his boots.

"Over across the tracks," the ex-deputy said. "He's got a man named Jake Saunders with him and old Slade, too. Them two have given the Rangers more trouble stealing wet Mexican cattle and killing Mexicans on both sides of the river than any dozen other men I ever heard of."

As Stony slung on his cartridge belt, the old familiar chill began to go through his body as it had done that day in Serino when he had killed Trimble and his pards. It had been there in the

hotel lobby in Plansville when Mike LeFeur had made his play for bounty money. Five thousand dollars, the same amount Texas now would be offering publicly for Holmes's capture.

Stony said, "Nothing to worry about, Oscar. Lieutenant Hagerman is at the fort on the Arkansas River five miles east of town. I'll get in touch with him."

"You might not have time. The boys downstairs don't think so."

"Stony, Slade either doublecrossed you or changed his mind!" Jean cried. "The men he was supposed to send away are all over there—seventeen of them, including Jeff!"

He put on his hat, and they descended the stairs. He looked at Jean. "You should have stayed on the ranch, Jean. I've spent months keeping you under cover and if I should go under now, anything could happen to you."

Her chin lifted, and he saw a chilly look come into her face. "I'm grateful for all you've done for me, but you seem to have forgotten that Ed is here and that I belong with him because he's my father."

"Come on," Stony said gruffly to the rider. "Let's get it over with."

In the street a few wagons creaked by, and now and then a fast-moving buggy left dust in its wake. Some distance down the street, on a railroad siding, wagons were drawn up beside a flat car, and men were tossing white objects up over the side—buffalo bones gathered from the prairie. More than a carload was shipped East each day to be made into fertilizer.

Here and there Stony saw a soldier, off duty, but no sign of Lieutenant Hagerman. Stony accosted one young soldier.

He wanted no fight, despite the grimly eager expressions of the faces of his men who had joined him by now. Many of them were married and had children, the main reason why Stony had been avoiding a fight.

"Where could I find Lieutenant Hagerman?" he asked the raw-boned youth.

"The lieutenant, suh," the soldier said in a soft, Southern drawl, "left during the night on emergency patrol. Some Indians who've been dying like flies down around Fort Sill in Oklahoma are trying to get back to where they come from. Po' devils all weak and sick and hungry with no guns, but everybody in town too yellow to help 'em. But Masterson, the marshal, got up a posse and went out."

"Good," one of Stony's men grunted in satisfaction. "I've been scared all along that the law or the troopers wouldn't let us get at them damn outlaws. Let's get going, Stony."

"You stay on this side of the street," was his sharp reply. "I still don't want a fight, because I don't want to pack some of you back to your wives and kids in a wagon and wrapped up in a tarp."

He turned his back on them because he knew what disappointment would be in each man's face. He walked on and then, down the street, a man stepped from the doorway of a saloon. A huge man with little scars around his eyes from dozens of rough-and-tumble fights. It was Joe Cumberland, and he was packing a six-shooter.

XX

NO LONGER was Joe Cumberland the arrogant wagon boss who had fought it out with Stony one fall day at a roundup. His blue denim pants were shiny from wear and cattle hairs clung to the seams. His boots were dirty and greenish around heels and toes. His stubby whiskers were dirt-covered and sweaty. He looked like a tramp except for his eyes. They had not changed. They bored almost savagely into Stony. One was slightly swollen. The man was in a dangerous mood.

"Go ahead and look," he sneered, hand close to his hip. "Look at a man who works cattle sick with shipping fever and cleans out the cars after them. But it's honest work, in a place I knew you'd show up some day. Mrs. Yerkes ain't

here now, Burns."

"No, Cumberland," Stony replied. "She's in the cemetery at Plainsville."

"I know!" Cumberland said harshly. "Ed Yerkes is working here on the railroad with me. So you wasn't satisfied with making a fool out of Irene before she left you flat and run off to Mexico to spend the winter with Jeff Holmes? You're all the same stripe, except Jean. She's the only decent one of the whole caboodle."

"One moment, Cumberland," Stony said coolly, and told the embittered man what really had happened, that his firing had been at Holmes's dictation, that Holmes had shot Irene and that he and a few of his hardcore men were now across the tracks some place.

The reaction he had expected did not come however. Cumberland was still remembering that no matter what had happened, Irene had been alone with Holmes for months.

"So you're going to kill him?" sneered the ex-wagon boss.

"Not if it can be avoided. I'm stalling until Masterson and the soldiers get back to town."

"Then you won't have to wait long for Bat. I was over to the depot just now. They got a message from some soldiers who'd run into Bat and his posse and told 'em to get back in town and stay here and let the troopers take care of their own work. Well, I can wait, too. I'm going to wait until after the fight and then—you or Jeff—I'm going to kill whichever comes out alive."

Stony started on past, then heard the man's voice again, something different in the sound. When Stony turned, he saw that the man's eyes were more haggard.

"You say Irene is going to—be—all right?"

"That's what the medicine squaw said."

"That's all I wanted to know. I'll be waiting for you or Jeff."

He went back into the bar again, and Stony walked on. His men had spread out and were lounging in various doorways. They were waiting and they didn't like it. The new responsibility of Stony's badge, they were thinking, had made a different man from the hardcase who had fought it out with the war party, then had gone after Jean and had killed Trimble and two others on the way out to civilization again.

They were unaware, as Stony himself was unaware, that this was the kind of calm thinking, intelligent leadership that was slowly but surely bringing law and order to the frontier, and fame and respect to men strong enough to stand censure and criticism and even abuse. Stony was waiting patiently, stalling for time, hoping.

But the gods of fate controlling the brain of another man across the tracks had willed differently, and from somewhere over there rifles began to crash from doorways. Two men died, and two wounded went down beside Stony; and Jeff Holmes's bullet cut past the old stetson and tore a four-inch gash in the hotel doorway within inches of where he and Jean Yerkes stood.

"Get out of sight!" Stony yelled at her as he dived into the hotel lobby.

Pandemonium broke loose in the streets. Men began to run and yell, and a horse hooked to a buggy reared high with a scream and raced down the street with a terrified woman in the wildly careening vehicle. Doors slammed everywhere as more shots crashed.

Another cowmen's fight in the streets. The citizens of the train town were used to them. Where in the hell was Masterson and his deputies? What the hell business did he have being out chasing a bunch of Indians?

STONY ran down the hall and out the back of the hotel. He saw a saddled horse and jumped for reins and stirrup. He raced down the alley into a cross street, cursing the luck that had made him forget his rifle. At a run he went to the livery, jumped down, and dashed inside.

"What's up?" yelled a man, running in from the corrals.

"Holmes's outlaws are in town and tangling with some cow outfit from Oklahoma and Texas!"

"That outlaw who's supposed to have hired a bunch of Comanche bucks—"

Stony, rifle in hand, was back in the saddle, the man's words lost to him. He drove his commandeered horse at a run, circling toward the man who had stopped loading buffalo bones. Stony jerked his horse to a halt as Ed Yerkes moved into view.

"What's up?" Yerkes cried.

"Holmes and his men! And Jean's at the Aztec Hotel, Ed! Go after her. Don't let anything happen!"

"Hell's fire, my girl here in town where *he* is? I'll be with you soon's I can get my gun."

Stony drove the horse on across the tracks, swung down the alley at a hard run, scattering tin cans and bottles. Heavy firing was coming from a saloon up ahead, and Stony pulled to a halt and ran for the back door. He kicked it open and stepped inside with the .44-40 in both hands and cocked.

"Slade!" he called thunderously. "Where's Jeff Holmes?"

Slade wheeled with a roar of surprise, six-shooter in hand. Facing him was a man with a pump action repeater that could get off five shots in two and a half seconds.

"Damn you!" he roared and tried to fire, but the .44-40 was crashing with deadly accuracy and Slade went down, another man beside him.

Stony shot a third man as a fourth dived through the front doorway. Winchesters and Colts were making their ugly, flat reports as a dozen or so men came running toward the tracks, zigzagging and firing, to have it out to a finish with the men who had opened the fight. Stony shot again and dropped the empty weapon.

He yelled to the two frozen bartenders, "Keep your hands above the bar, damn you!" The snarling sound told of the rage in him. Two of his men dead, shot down without warning!

With a six-shooter in his right hand he jumped onto the shady board walk. Then he saw Holmes and another man—Saunders, who had been here waiting for Jean who had never arrived until less than a half-hour before.

Three more men had dived out behind Holmes and Saunders and in Stony's mind flashed the thought that he was going down, but he wanted Holmes before he went. The worn gun in his hand began the familiar hard bucking under his thumbed shots. Smoke and flame spurts lashed through the air as Stony smashed two shots into the big outlaw, aware that men were shooting at him and yelling.

He saw Holmes go down, another, and then another. He saw two other men fall as though by magic, and then he stood there with an empty gun in his hand as Joe Cumberland walked toward him along the board walk from the opposite direction, a tiny wisp of smoke coming from the barrel of his six-shooter. They met over five sprawled bodies.

"You all right, Stony?" asked the ex-wagon boss.

"I guess so. You?"

"I had to run like hell when I seen you cut a circle on that horse. Glad I got here in time. I figured you'd come spewing out one of them front doors. Too bad you beat me to this." He rolled Holmes' body over with a boot toe, looking down at the bearded face and wide open eyes that saw nothing. "But I got two of 'em anyhow. Look!"

Riders were fleeing in all directions with Stony's men in hot pursuit. Pandemonium gripped the town and men still yelled while they ran, but the fight was over. Stony saw Jean running toward him and then, above all other sound, came the clear notes of a bugle as hard riding troopers with Lieutenant Hagerman at their heads thundered down the street.

"Stony!" he cried out and swung

down to shake hands. "You all right? Good! I'd just got back from a redskin scare this morning when Jean called the fort on the military wire."

THINKING of how Rube Hankins down in Texas had snorted about the troops always being too late, Stony somehow managed to grin.

He said, "Well, I guess that's all settled, Charley. I'll be heading back toward Oklahoma. You'll eat with Jean and me tonight, of course?"

Hagerman, however, smiled and shook his head, his face alight.

"Can't do it, old man. My transfer orders finally came through. I'm taking the train out this afternoon to join Custer's Seventh at Fort Lincoln, in the Dakotas. He's in St. Paul with General Terry, going over final plans for the biggest campaign against the Sioux."

Stony walked back to the hotel with Jean Yerkes. His feet ached and he felt tired, and sick inside. He hadn't wanted it this way. He handn't wanted to haul back tarp-covered men in wagons to be buried on the great ranch where a lonely, wounded woman lay waiting. Jean looked up at him as they entered the hotel lobby.

She said simply, "I see Ed coming along over there with a gun on his hip. It makes him look ridiculous with his dirty clothes and gray hair, Stony. But he's working with Joe Cumberland down at the loading pens, trying to forget, and that's most important to me right now. Go back to her, Stony. She never needed help from anyone before you came along. She'll need you more than ever now. Go back and think of Ed and me in the restaurant."

"Ed's a cowman," Stony told her sternly. "He's been a cowman all his life and never will be anything else. He's going right back to the Snyder outfit in Texas and so is Joe Cumberland.—Joe, come in here!"

Cumberland came in. He removed his hat and grinned a little and rubbed tenderly at his swollen eye. But the bitterness in him was gone, and there was something new in his face.

"When are you leaving?" Stony asked.

"Just as soon as I can draw my pay and get a good horse. I suppose I'd have got some sense sooner or later and gone back to her anyhow. But it took you to come along and shock some sense into my fool head."

"You can make my ranch by midnight. Take Ed Yerkes with you, Joe. He'll never be happy away from the cemetery in Plainsville. And you can tell Irene."

"Tell her what?" Cumberland asked.

"Just what I finished saying, you hard-headed jackass," Stony grinned. "That Jean was born on a ranch and wouldn't be happy any place else. Irene will understand that I hated her at first and tried to hurt her for what she did to me, but that Poke Burns, like Jean's mother, is beyond hurt and that we're beyond hate. She'll understand."

"She'll understand." Cumberland nodded. "She'll understand that the past few months have changed a lot of lives in a lot of ways."

Up in the room Stony slung off his gunbelt. He went over to the window beside Jean and put an arm around her. "Well?" he asked gently.

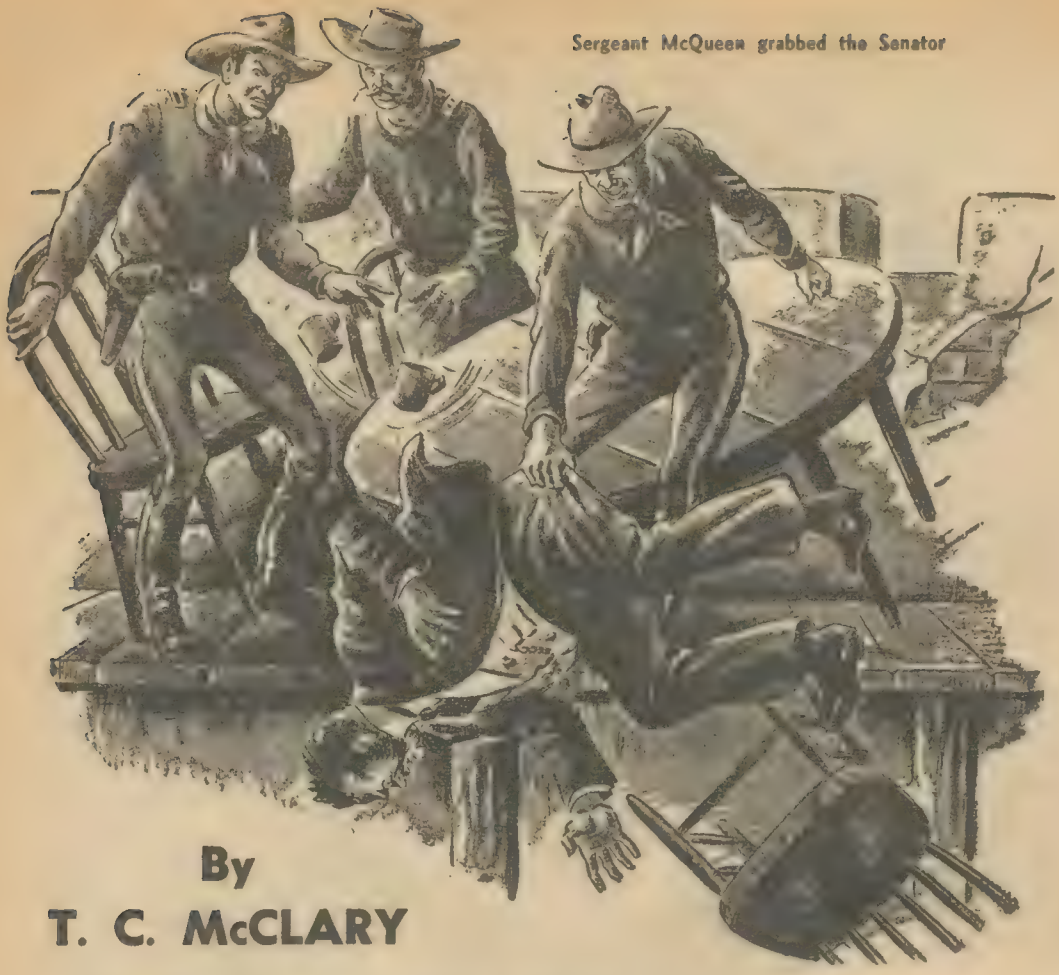
"You—you didn't even ask me," she said in a low voice.

"I didn't think I had to," he told her. "You saw what one woman did to a good wagon boss like Joe. You're too lovely and sincere to let it happen to another man, even me."

She laughed then and slid into his arms as though it was the hundredth time instead of the first. She pulled back after he had kissed her, and laughed again, breathlessly.

"I never intended for it to happen, Stony," she admitted, looking up at his tired face. "Though it did the very first moment you rode up that day last fall. My heart started turning somersaults then, and right now—"

He could feel the beat of it as he kissed her again. ●●●



Sergeant McQueen grabbed the Senator

By
T. C. McCLARY

FRONTIER POST

Spit and polish had little part in the life of a frontier soldier, especially polish. But the Senator couldn't see why—at first!

MIDWAY of morning, the courier arrived from regimental headquarters at Laramie, sweat soaked, dust coated, his leathery face lined with fatigue.

Brevet Captain Biggs flicked him a glance as he opened the dispatch canister. "What took you so long?"

The trooper darkened under his weathered color. "Intelligence advised back trail, sir," he said. "There's hostiles all over it. I was holed up three times for a day each."

Biggs's mouth touched with ironic humor. "Headquarters must finally be reading its outpost reports. The Blackfeet just went on the warpath."

He added to his orderly, "See this

man gets all the steak he can eat and bunk him."

His blue eyes slipped over the dispatches. He was more interested in the personal letter from the colonel's adjutant, a friend. Senator Perkins had arrived West on investigation, breathing hell's fire and damnation to the cavalry in general, and Biggs's command in particular. It seemed that the miners whose so-called road Fort Union guarded had complained that the trail was not safe to travel.

They were damned well right, Biggs considered grimly. Congress had outdone itself when it threw open these new gold fields. Instead of breaking treaty and arousing only one tribe, it had succeeded in inflaming five. Under the circumstances, an entire regiment couldn't have kept that trail safe.

The fort was a joke, the size of his garrison comic, and his being in command blatant irony . . . part of the relentless discipline for breaking the first commandment of an officer ten years back and using initiative. The adjutant's letter hinted at that. If the Senator's report should prove unfavorable, which was a foregone assumption, Biggs might as well consider his career staked. At any cost of pride, or, if necessary, troops, Biggs was advised to present the best face possible for the cavalry. The Senator was already en route in company with the paymaster.

BIGGS looked across the room at a general order which had fascinated him so deeply that he'd framed it. No Indian, it stated, was to be regarded or treated as a hostile unless definitely identified by a witness, or apprehended in an act of belligerency. In short, no Indian could be traced and punished, for the Indians were not in the habit of attack, or even committing murder, under doubtful circumstances. They made sure that anybody who might apprehend them or identify them was either not around or thoroughly dead.

It occurred to him now that the grapevine had reported it was the Senator's committee which demanded that order, to prove the Great White Father's "fairness" to the redskin. What it had actually accomplished was the encouragement of four or five hundred Blackfeet to hit the warpath. But as a personal choice, Biggs preferred the Blackfeet to the Senator.

He filled his lungs to bawl out for Sergeant McQueen. Before he had emitted a sound, McQueen swung around the doorway.

"Where in hell," Biggs demanded, "is that renegade, John Cloud?"

"He is making medicine with his ancestors, sir," McQueen reported.

"How long's he been drunk?" Biggs growled.

"Only four days, Captain. He has four more to run."

Biggs cursed to himself. McQueen could probably ferret his chief scout out, but it would do no good. When John Cloud felt the need of communion with his ancestors, the world could go to hell. And Biggs had no other scout he'd trust to report upon the Blackfeet.

The sentry sang out a call from the gate and McQueen glanced out through the door and allowed, "Maybe I was wrong, sir. Here he comes."

John Cloud rolled out of his saddle, picked himself up with pride, spurning aid, and lurched through the door of the headquarters shack. He raised a hand, half salute, half Indian sign, to Biggs, and after a thunderous, rolling belch allowed, "Gen'r'l, I'm back on the warpath."

Biggs leaned back slack in his chair with his boots stretched out straight under the table. He regarded his chief scout with a mixture of austerity, fondness, disapproval and envy. He said, "When you wake up, you can draw a pint from medical to keep you from jumping through your derby. Not a drop more! I need you."

John Cloud hiccoughed, grinned with a combination of stupidity and cunning, and wiped tobacco stained mustaches

with the back of a gnarled, hairy hand. "For the big chief from Washington? Would he be called a sin-ay-tor, Gen-'r'l?"

Biggs scowled. "How do you know about him?"

The scout made a spiral gesture in the air. He talked with his hands as much as with his mouth. "Smokes. Clean through from the Pawnees at Council Bluffs. The Nez Perce knew the news a week before that secret courier from Laramie come busting through like a buffalo stampede."

Biggs gave a tight-mouthed grin. "Even drunk you know too much! Some day I'm going to personally scalp you."

John Cloud rumbled a burp and chuckled. "So long as we have a good drink on it first, Gen'r'l! Now I got to get me a little shut-eye. Your sin-ay-tor should be getting here about halfway to sundown, if the damned Arapahoe smokes ain't lying as usual."

This time, the scout lifted his moss green derby for salute, belched elegantly, and lurched out, falling neatly into the expectant arms of Sergeant McQueen, who toted him off like a sleeping baby to sleep off his drunk in the haypile.

"A man of surprising parts," Biggs commented to junior Lieutenant Greaves, whose face had not yet weathered into the color and texture of old leather.

Lieutenant Greaves shifted awkwardly in his seat. "Sometimes he seems lacking in proper military respect," he noted.

"*Sometimes?*" Biggs hooted. "Why he thinks the military was created just particularly for his support and enjoyment! And after ten years, I am beginning to think maybe he's right."

Lieutenant Greaves stared at his superior with surprise. "You approve of that in scouts, Captain?"

Biggs's eyes turned bleak. "What I approve of is anything that will get me the highest loyalty and courage possible from my command! It is not considered proper military procedure, Mr. Greaves, but it wins skirmishes and it is the backbone of battle."

HE TURNED to writing a brief summary of the Blackfeet outbreak to Laramie, as far as he knew it. His scouts had cut sign on three to five hundred of the devils along the trail, and they had ambushed two wagons from the gold fields that he knew of. The number was very considerable for Indians and they had brought their villages, indicating they meant to spend the rest of the summer camped or wandering around those hills.

Sergeant McQueen came back and Biggs gave a series of orders on policing the post, troops and horses, and the reception of the Senator. He would have liked another day, or even two, for a thorough cleaning. That post needed it. It had not been maintained with the idea of entertaining important personages.

He saw to his routine chores, missing midday mess, grabbed a sandwich and coffee late, and went to his quarters to spruce up. Sundown was at seven o'clock. John Cloud had said, "—halfway to sundown." His confidence in John Cloud was evident by the fact that he did not hook on his saber and step out into the fort's small yard until twenty minutes after three. He spent precisely fifteen minutes inspecting men and switching at flies before the paymaster's wagon and escort topped the hump and came down through the beating yellow sea of haze.

Just how John Cloud escaped his eye he could never quite figure. But unbeknownst to him, the scout had arisen miraculously from his heavy slumber and moved to the top of the sentry box, where he sprawled out comfortably, watching the paymaster's approach through the gate crack.

As the party approached, Biggs gave the trumpeter an order. Martial notes crackled against the fort's log walls. Biggs's voice rolled out, taken up by Lieutenant Greaves's tightly self-con-

scious orders, broken down into separate orders by McQueen's deep-chested bark. A senatorial salute was put off in volley. Undoubtedly, it sounded somewhat weak to a man used to cannon, but it was the best the post could do with what it had.

The paymaster's wagon drew abreast of the gates and stopped. The sentries presented arms, and then the guard of honor. The guard then performed a complicated drill maneuver and flanked the paymaster's wagon, on the front seat of which, the perspiring, florid-jowled Senator was seated puffing with discomfort.

The little ceremony had the feel of military smartness to it, and Biggs was feeling a touch of pride until he looked at the Senator's face. The Senator, clearly, had not been impressed. In fact, he had not noticed. He was simply staring at the post, aghast.

"*This* is the fort that is supposed to guard the road?" he barked.

"Fort Union, sir," Biggs saluted. "Captain Biggs in command."

The Senator pinned him with a piercing look. "I understood your rank was lieutenant?"

Biggs's jaws hardened slightly. "Brevet captain, Senator, if you prefer to use the full designation."

The Senator gave a grunting breath and eased his sore seat.

"We will try to make your stay here a pleasant one, Senator," Biggs said politely.

"*No!*" the Senator muttered, as if that were something beyond earthly forces. "I am not here for pleasantries, Captain. Also, I will not be here but tonight."

Biggs's steel blue eyes twinkled. He was going to have his pound of flesh at that. "I am afraid you will have to prepare for a few days longer, sir. The Blackfeet have just gone on the warpath and are holding the trail to the mines.

"*Holding the trail?*" the Senator bristled. "Why hasn't something been done to make it safe?"

AT THIS point, either the Senator or the sun was a little too much for John Cloud's delicate condition. He emitted an enormous, cascading series of reverberating belches, terminating in very definite sounds that indicated he would shortly relieve his stomach from atop the sentry box.

Biggs said quickly to Sergeant McQueen, "Escort the Senator to my quarters!"

But John Cloud's acute timing beat McQueen's orders.

The Senator alighted with a green tinge to the ruddy windburn of his face. He was quivering with indignation. "Who," he demanded of Biggs, "is that dishevelled, drunken bum, and what is he doing here?"

"He is a civilian employee," Biggs answered. "He has been suffering with mountain fever."

"I caught the breath of it!" the Senator snapped.

Biggs considered silence and a drink the better part of valor. But there had been no slightest breath of wind today and stagnant heat lay through his quarters, bringing out the smells of horse sweat, rancid grease, wet leather and stinkwater mud, and the acrid smell of alkali that pervaded everything. The Senator stood having his drink with his nose twitching and his eyes sparking. His critical temper was further stoked with everything he noted.

When he learned there was only the officer's somewhat scummy soak tub for him to bathe in, he was really getting into a froth.

"I hope," Biggs said a little grimly to the paymaster colonel when the Senator had gone to bathe, "the bath will cool him."

A bellow of horror came from the shed beyond. The Senator dashed in stark naked, bereft of dignity and yelping with terror. Somehow, a leech had been bucketed through from the creek, and had attached itself to his portly posterior. Circumstance forced him into the highly undignified position of lying

atop the table while Biggs and the colonel poured salt on the leech to get it off him.

His mood was not precisely mellowed by the experience.

The incident left Biggs torn between severity and humor and the colonel dangerously explosive with suppressed laughter. Actually, leeches were not so rare but that it could have been an accident. But there was no love of Congress in the cavalry. This garrison was composed of men forced to fight with obsolete carbines while the supposedly friendly Indians they fought were given the latest and longer range repeaters. And that leech had the smell of barracks humor.

Biggs thought about that with compressed lips and a hard light in his eyes, and then thought wryly, what the hell, if he can't take the frontier, what's he think it's like for the men stuck out here two and three years without even a leave or furlough?

Still, he bethought him of John Cloud again and was just about to have the man trailed down and hung when the Senator returned, fresh dressed and filled with icy wrath at the destruction of his dignity.

Happily, Biggs had earlier prepared a sweat jug of good bourbon drinks and they had cooled. Putting a few fast ones into the Senator's august paunch, he took him up onto the fort's cooler shooting step from which place he could enjoy the evening sundown.

This step was but a broad runway atop the buildings and sheds built against the front wall of the fort. But McQueen had contrived to squeeze a table and chairs up there, and with bourbon and good cigars and the grandeur of the sundown putting its irresistible mood upon him, the Senator began to quiet.

WISELY, Biggs let the paymaster colonel carry the conversation while he sought in his own mind for a means around the present situation. The courier would take the dispatches back to Laramie, of course, but it might be a week before it could be decided what to do.

Laramie might send over half a dozen troops to clear the road and act as special escort. But it was also possible that the Blackfeet would make them look like damn fools.

If the Senator was required to turn back, that would only verify the miners' charges that the road was unsafe. If he stayed here in his present mood any length of time, he would be bound to notice frontier laxities which he would consider a breach of military conduct and slack authority. Even if Laramie sent a special detachment as escort, the very need of it was not going to lift the Senator's low opinion of the state of things.

It was a nice kettle of fish any way Biggs looked at it. And he had the somber thought that no matter what happened, he was the lad who'd hold the bag.

It was at this point that the Senator came off Olympus sufficiently to raise his mug in grudging toast to the post. He had just uttered the toast with rolling oratory when the arrow whistled through the air.

The mug exploded in the Senator's hand. Bellowing, the Senator kicked back from the table, putting his chair legs over the edge of the shooting step. He would have followed except for the alertness of Sergeant McQueen, who grabbed him. Unfortunately, the only place that McQueen could grab was the seat of the Senator's pants.

So the Senator hung there, emitting a confusion of sounds and swinging like a heavy sack until the sentries could rush around and catch him from below.

The colonel was blowing his nose to cover the tears coursing from his eyes, but Biggs was keening the nearest brush-fringed ridge with cold fire. The Blackfeet were not so stupid as to approach that closely to the fort in open daylight. And there was only one man

in that fort who could shoot an arrow with such marksmanship.

He said grimly to McQueen as the Senator was rescued, "Corral John Cloud and take him down behind the stables. And bring your knife. I'm going to have his damned renegade ears!"

McQueen grinned "Yessir!" and bellowed down into the fort, "Trumpeter, sound Boots and Saddles!"

McQueen was a good sergeant. He knew how to make a show of it. He made a good enough show so that the Senator forgot he had been dangled by his seat, a comic spectacle the garrison would long remember. The commotion of a post called up for foray was ambrosia for his self importance. When he was hustled under cover, *"in case there should be an attack,"* it seemed to him a perfectly natural order of things. The Great must be protected.

WHEN McQueen brought word, Biggs saw John Cloud in private down behind the stables. When occasion called for it, the captain had a vocabulary which would have brought envy from a muleskinner. He used it on John Cloud for a solid ten minutes. Worst of anything, he cut off the scout's pint of sobering medicine. The scout knew Biggs was really mad then, and he felt plumb miserable about it.

"Aw, Gen'r'l, I didn't know you'd take it like that!" he almost blubbered. "I just figured you'd want to give that there sin-ay-tor a little fun while he was calling."

"It'll be fun, all right!" Biggs snapped. "The cavalry will be damned lucky if it gets oats next year if he ever figures this! As for the bars on my shoulders, I can get ready to pin them on a mirror, regardless!"

The scout scuffed the dust and spit. "I shoulda stayed drunk," he opined. "Gen'r'l lieutenant, I'm real sorry I done anything that hurts you personal. You jist tell me anything in the world I can do to make things right!"

"You might," Biggs told him sarcastically, "take a run up trail and clean out the Blackfeet!"

John Cloud didn't catch the sarcasm. He shook his head. "You couldn't clear them out short of a three month campaign and half a regiment," he said. "Ain't nothing short of the Crows could. . . ."

He broke off and looked at Biggs, and Biggs stared back at him. Speculative lights rose in the captain's eyes. His authority for dealing with the Indians was very strict and limited. His whole career had been broken once for using far less initiative than this. And still, if he could impress the Senator in favor of the cavalry. . . .

"Suppose," he asked John Cloud, "I relinquish your penalty of punishment, and give you a leave of absence until you're sobered up. Who would you go visiting?"

John Cloud chuckled. "Why, I been hankering to see my old friend Big Wind, the Crow chief, for a long time. I might jist mosey over and see what he's up to."

Biggs looked at him with mixed humor and gravity. "That will be a bad trail right now, John."

John Cloud hitched his belt and arched his chest and spit. "Gen'r'l, I've lost nineteen scouts to Blackfeet, going back over time! I'd take real pleasure in getting together with Big Wind and swapping opinions of them."

Biggs hesitated for one moment of considered thought, then nodded. "All right. Draw your supplies and report your leave. How long do you figure you'll be away?"

The scout looked at the darkening afterglow of sundown and cut weather sign upon certain peaks. "Gen'r'l, I should be coming out of the mists three mornings from now."

Biggs smiled, poked him in the chest and gave him a plug of choice tobacco. He returned to quarters wiping sweat from his forehead. He didn't know if John Cloud would get there. He didn't know if the idea would work if he did.

And if it did work, he still didn't know whether or not he'd get the hatchet from GHQ.

But it was worth the chance. The Crows would fight any other tribe, but they held abiding hatred for the Blackfeet.

Biggs found the Senator stalking his narrow stoop like a warhorse champing at the bit. That arrow had given him a new idea of Indians. That much was to the good, but it had not reduced his censure of the cavalry. If the cavalry was on its toes, the Indians wouldn't dare commit such effrontery!

HE WAS in a pointedly critical mood, and he used the visible evidence of what he considered the post's slackness as example. Laundry flopped in open sight. Carts, ammunition wagons and wheel sets had been racked willynilly in the front yard. There was no paint, no neat whitewashed walks.

The sick bay had been placed over the sutler's, and its smells drifted out upon the square. Uniforms were dust-soaked beyond recognition, and the smart and rigid drill deportment of troopers in the East was entirely lacking. There was an air of casual off-handedness between officers and men, betokening, to his mind, a soft authority.

Biggs contained a sharp retort with effort. He said, "The fact is, Senator, we are pretty easygoing on a frontier post. We have something to worry about besides policing and parades. When men have been out starving, roasting, freezing, fighting, and in the saddle fourteen and sixteen hours at a stretch, they are not in much mood to be pretty."

The Senator's look challenged him. "Come, come, Captain," he rumbled pontifically, "if you are on your toes to that extent, why have we been getting complaints from the miners? What are these hostile Blackfeet doing in your area? Why are they so bold that they dare crawl right up to the fort *and shoot at me?*"

Biggs's lips compressed. He said with difficulty, "Well, sir, I hope your opinion of us will change before you leave."

"I hope so!" the Senator stated brittlely. "I very much hope so, Captain, for I am not greatly impressed with what I've seen."

Biggs had ordered a banquet supper late, accommodating the hour to the cool of evening. The trumpeter put officers' mess call ripping the airs, and he escorted the Senator with proper ceremony.

The cook had done himself proud with antelope, buffalo, bear and bighorn, and the biggest trout the Senator had ever seen. For just a moment, he looked impressed and more convivial. But the back windows were open for draft and the stables backed on officers' mess, and the wind chose that precise instant to change.

The cavalry lived with horse smell. It took Biggs a moment or two even to figure out the swift change in the Senator's expression. But that time, any correction of the situation was too late. The Senator had lost his appetite, and watching the officers gorge with enjoyment, he reached the conclusion that all the cavalry did on the taxpayer's money was to come out here to hunt and eat.

It was unfortunate that John Cloud stepped inside mess to report his departure, but the customs of the post were not to stand upon formality. Biggs went down the room to have a final talk. If John Cloud's unofficial mission was successful, one thing was paramount. The Crows would have to leave their Blackfeet enemy unscalped and leave their arms for half a day. Scalping was a thing that deeply disturbed an Eastern civilian's sensibilities, and most certainly, a man whose appetite would be upset by a little stable smell, would be very gravely upset by the sight of scalped and mutilated corpses.

John Cloud shook his head. He said, "Gen'r'l, there is jist certain things you can't expect of Injuns, even Crows."

Biggs cut the air with the side of his hand. "You tell Big Wind he has got to

see to that! Tell him I have presents for him of all the bullets he uses, salt and sugar. But he has got to leave those scalps and their arms beside them! Half a day. That's all."

John Cloud insisted, "But he won't understand why. He will think you're trying to trick him of his glory."

"Tell him," Biggs snapped through tight lips, "that the Blackfeet have boasted that he wouldn't dare not scalp them or they would come back to life and fight again after half a day! Tell him they leaned over and wiggled their backsides at the Crow country."

The scout's slat lips spread in a grin. He nodded and touched his derby. "That may do it, Gen'r'l!"

Biggs dug him in the ribs. "Don't let me find you loafing out there in the hills full of arrows."

John Cloud chuckled. "If you do, you'll find Blackfeet underneath me!"

BIGGS returned to the table with the feeling of a man who has committed himself to the devil and now at least knows that nothing can be done to halt the consequences. Young Lieutenant Greaves, damn him, had sharp ears and piped up, "He taking a message to Big Wind, Captain?"

The Senator's glare snapped from one to the other. "You're entrusting that dissolute, disreputable half-breed as official emissary, Biggs?" he demanded.

Biggs sucked a long breath through his teeth. He was glad the Senator had used the word "Official." It enabled him to make a truthful answer when he said, "I have given him leave until he's sober, sir. He is going visiting where he'll be less of a disturbance."

The Senator grunted in his throat. "There has been too much trusting of these scouts," he commented. "The impression one gets is that they are able to accomplish missions of which an officer is not capable!"

Biggs darkened under his walnut burn. "Sir, on the frontier, we have to rely heavily upon the scouts, and by Act of Congress, most scouts are excluded from enlistment or commissions in the Army!"

The Senator gave a blast of breath. "Then obviously, if they are excluded by Congress, your officers should be capable of somewhat higher accomplishments, Captain!"

That was a bald statement to which there was no civil answer, and Biggs clamped his jaws and made none. The paymaster colonel stepped into the breach, commenting conversationally, "Senator, I think we can all agree that the trouble is not scouts nor cavalry nor Congress, but the hostile redskins. Such as the one that shot at you, sir."

The Senator emitted a blast of breath. He could certainly agree on that last!

"Well, yes," he acknowledged grudgingly. "I suppose that is really the trouble and tempers have grown short. I have disagreed throughout with the entire policy of making treaties with these savages."

This was his favorite subject and he held forth in oratorical tones. Talking of his own views always put the Senator into repose, and there was an hour or two of pleasantry after that. Corporal Sanders had built a roasting pit in the yard. Its flames put light and shadow dancing along the stockade, and brushed the drab raw buildings with the spell of the frontier. Day's heavy drifting dust had damped down and now gave off a pleasantly pungent odor, and the invigorating smells of the woods and the high deserts drifted on the night breezes.

The Senator relaxed, and his mood mellowed. He was not won to the western cavalry's cause, but he was swept up by its deep and simple camaraderie.

Biggs breathed easier and considered where it might be safe to take the Senator hunting and prayed no further incident would raise the august personage's choler.

The next day was good. The Senator brought down three antelope and a grizzly bear by the unsuspected luck of

having Sergeant McQueen shooting from behind him. The next day was still better, with the Senator getting his first taste of angling for salmon trout.

It looked as if his enforced stay might, after all, turn out well, but unfortunately, at mess, the argument arose as to whether or not Lee had been a traitor. Lee had been a cavalryman and a gallant officer, and in general, the cavalry admired him. It appeared the Senator did not. In fact, the Senator thought he should have been hung by the neck, drawn and quartered, and his head mounted on a lance and ridden through the land.

His somewhat violent views on the matter were evidenced too late. The pro-Lee feelings of the cavalry had shown, and had served to remind the Senator of his original feelings, now fortified with the consideration that these men were damned near rebels themselves.

It was not the case, of course, but he had wrenched his side that day and the sprain was hurting. And now he was put in mind of the fact that he was being held, practically a hostage here, and delayed in his trip, simply because these useless, rebel-loving cavalrymen didn't have the courage or ability to get out and make the road safe for him.

Come to think of it, what was Biggs doing about matters? There hadn't even been a scout party go out since his arrival.

BIGGS saw him to bed and came back out into the night with lips compressed. The paymaster colonel was standing in the center of the square talking with McQueen. Biggs found them discussing the thing on his own mind. Where was John Cloud?

McQueen nodded northward along the trail. "Something stirring up there all evening, sir," he said. "Those drums have a new beat. With your permission, I'd take Corporal Sanders and go take a look-see."

Biggs shook his head. "Too much risk, Sergeant. They may just be trying to bait us. They must have scouts lying around us thick as snakes."

McQueen looked grimly into the star-washed darkness. "Well, then, sir, could I post sentries at the break of the trail to cover him if he comes through with the red devils on his tail?"

Biggs said, "Yes, I think we can risk that, he said. See that the garrison sleeps on the alert, with two squads remounts bitted and saddled on picket. Have guns stacked out here . . . loaded."

"Yes sir!" McQueen saluted with grim relief and went about the business.

The paymaster colonel commented, "Your sergeant seems to think they've got him."

"Well if they did, it was on the way back if those drums only changed this evening. But I am more of a mind that they may have him cornered but not smoked out. John Cloud is an able scout."

The colonel gave a dry smile. "With a sense of humor," he noted. "It is too bad he can't be elected to Congress. I think a few real leeches and arrows down there might do some good!"

Biggs grinned somberly, but this was the rough-grained humor of men used to joking as they reached for their last water or last bullets. Behind it lay the harsh, realistic knowledge of the Blackfeet, and a precise picture of what John Cloud was going through, if he was being tortured.

McQueen reappeared with two squads leading saddled horses. They picketed them by the gate, stacking arms nearby. He returned them to barracks and shortly appeared again in saddle with half of Corporal Sanders's squad, just about accounting for the garrison. Neither sabers nor accoutrements except canteens and arms; all chains muffled.

He reined up, studied the sky, and allowed, "I will wait for a cloud, Lieutenant."

Biggs nodded. "Keep it quiet. Our honored guest might decide this was more waste of the taxpayers' money!"

A stream of clouds drifted across the sky, darkening the starwash. With a low, gruff sound, McQueen signaled the gates open and led his detail out into the thick-shadowed darkness. Biggs took the colonel to quarters for a nightcap. Shortly, he turned in fully clothed with his pistol belt hanging over a chair nearby.

Toward dawn, a break of staccato rifle fire outside the fort brought him to his feet and running as he fastened on his belt. Men were already tumbling out of barracks, racing for the horses.

"Mount!" he yelled. "Open gates! Column of twos, march on the double!"

His men went out ahead of him while a stable guard brought up his own horse. He vaulted into the saddle and tore out after them. It was highly unorthodox procedure and no doubt would have given the Senator bleak satisfaction. But his men were seasoned and could practically foretell his commands.

He rode hard, bending toward the nearing crackle of gunfire. A trooper was trotting toward him with a second figure riding behind.

"John Cloud?" Biggs called.

"Ain't nobody else, Gen'r'l" the scout's burry voice answered out of darkness. He was sounding crusty, but spent.

"Medical shack!" Biggs ordered briefly. "Don't even yip to that politico!"

HE DRUMMED on toward where he saw the dark red tongues of fire stabbing out into this hour's dense darkness. "Cease fire!" McQueen's voice broke from the screen of a hillside. "I think we accounted for them all, sir. Anybody hurt? Sound off by name."

McQueen's detail answered up. All intact. Biggs took McQueen and his detail back in.

The Senator was running around the yard in his nightshirt trying to find out what the trouble was. His voice was high-pitched, Biggs noted with satisfaction. He was scared stiff. It was a good thing for some of these civilians to feel the shadow of terror now and then.

Biggs said gruffly, "See you in mess hall, sir," and went on to the now lighted medical shack up over the sutler's.

John Cloud was stripped to the waist, lying back in a chair with a glass of whisky in his hand, a beatific grin upon his face. A medical orderly was fixing a salt bath for his bloody, swollen feet.

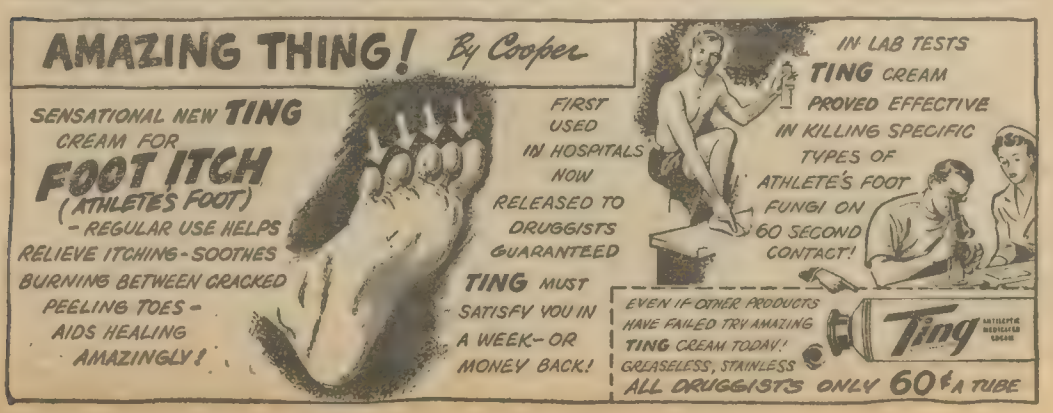
John Cloud chuckled. "Thought they had me when they got my horse! I holed up on 'em and drew my hole in after me. All afternoon they been nosing right by my hideaway. I could have spit on 'em."

Biggs examined his feet. "How in hell did you get cut up like that?"

"Came cross country when I snuck loose. Right straight as an arrow, Gen'r'l!"

Biggs sat down and poured himself a glass of whisky. He was going to have

[Turn page]


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED
TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!
IN LAB TESTS TING CREAM PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON 60 SECOND CONTACT!
EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE
Ting

a hell of time with the quartermaster over medical replacements this month!

"Big Wind?" he asked.

John Cloud nodded and made gestures. "He didn't know the Blackfeet were down here. He said this was his ancestors' hunting land. He was boiling that Blackfeet had the nerve to come and walk across his father's spirit. He was making big medicine when I started back."

"When will he come?"

"He must be there. He had over two hundred braves right at Red Lodge. He was signaling in more from the Crazy and the Yellowstone. He promised, 'Make big war, clean 'em out.' They insulted his ancestors. He is the white man's friend."

"And the scalps and arms?"

John Cloud chuckled. "He said, good. He hoped Blackfeet medicine works. Then his warriors would have fine time killing them two, three times over!"

Satisfaction settled on Biggs's face. He moved to the open window and listened to the wild tempo of the drums. He came back and reinspected Cloud's feet. "You sure walked! You hurt otherwise?"

"Few scratches."

Biggs eyed him closely and went out.

Dawn was putting its colors across the gray-blue East. Biggs called for Sanders and a second scout. "Ride up trail, but ride carefully," he ordered. "Hole up on Sawtooth and cut what sign you can. Semaphore the minute you cut sign that Big Wind's got the Blackfeet on the run."

"Suppose it's the other way?" Corporal Sanders asked.

"It won't be!" Biggs grunted. "A Crow's a Crow. And this is extra special hate for Blackfeet."

Biggs stalled off the Senator's questions. Yes, Indians had been found crawling near the fort. Nothing to worry about, but they'd have to be taken care of. A scout party would go out sometime soon to clear the trail.

The Senator had his taste of Indians now. An arrow through his drink and his sleep disturbed. Damned savages ought to be exterminated!

Biggs told him about the general order. The Senator looked fierce. He'd see departmental headquarters itself abut that!

Biggs stationed semaphore men on the shooting step, their eyes glued on Sawtooth. About midway of morning the first signal came. There had been fighting. The Crows must have used the night as cover and surprised a big camp of Blackfeet at dawn. For that particular camp, it was a massacre. But fights with other sizeable Blackfeet parties were still going on all over the hills.

Then the second message, an hour later. The Crows had them on the run.

BIGGS emitted a hard, long breath and ordered, "Boots and Saddles!" He led out nearly the whole garrison and bent up trail at a steady canter. They came on the scene of the first massacre under high sun.

He looked the scene over and remarked with bleak satisfaction, "The Crows sure know how to do it!"

A messenger came from Big Wind. Except for stragglers, he would have every Blackfoot in those hills by sundown. He would wait for sunup to see the working of their big medicine. But of course it was a lie. What else would a Blackfoot tell?

Biggs semaphored for the paymaster escort to bring up the Senator, fast as possible.

The party arrived about midway to sundown. The Senator looked at the scene of massacre with a mixture of sickness and bewilderment. He said to Biggs, "But you had less than thirty men, and these Indians were armed with rifles and were forted!"

Biggs spit his quid and tore off a fresh chew. His eyes twinkled. "All in a day's work for the cavalry, Senator!"

John Cloud came galloping along, stirrups tucked up, his feet swathed in

bandages big as his head. "Gen'r'l," he complained, "you shouldn't have sneaked off without me!"

"*Sneaked off?*" the Senator repeated, bridling with censure at this lack of proper decorum and respect. Then he saw the humor in Biggs's eyes and gave a feeble laugh. "Well, as you said, fighting men are different, Captain?"

His nose wrinkled and he gave the scene another pained glance. "Won't I have to be hurrying through?"

Biggs nodded. "We'll have to camp you along trail, as it is."

As they rode along, occasional bursts of yells were heard out of the hills and creeks.

The Senator shuddered. "Not our men?"

"No, that will be the death cry of the hostiles," Biggs told him.

He made camp as late as he could. He wanted to get the Senator along. But now with night falling, savage drums and bloodcurdling yells broke out of the hills to their side. Even a greenhorn could figure certain things.

"They can't still be fighting," the Senator said to Biggs. "And there's been no gunfire for quite awhile."

Biggs felt a cold wave strike him. If the high brass ever got wind of what he'd done without authority, he'd wish to the devil he was on one of those Crow torture fires instead!

He looked hopelessly toward McQueen who looked more hopelessly toward John Cloud.

"You speaking of that caterwauling, President?" John Cloud asked. "Why, that's just their womenfolk holding their laments."

"*Women?* Make *that* noise?" the Senator asked. He shuddered! "Captain, I want to take this occasion to state that this day has been a great eye-opener to me as to the ferocious gallantry of the cavalry! I think we might have a little drink on that."

Biggs expelled his breath and wiped cold perspiration from his neck. "Yessir. Would it be fitting to include the chief scout?"

The Senator glared down nose at John Cloud with indignation. Suddenly, he chuckled, "Why sure! We have all been comrades together in this bloody foray! We'll all drink together now like comrades!"

"Why, President, that is spoken like a true Injun fighter!" John Cloud said. "You got the look in your eye of a man who's felt his scalp being lifted, but was still cool enough to gouge the eyes right plumb out of his enemy's head."

The Senator felt his stomach constrict. But he kind of liked the picture. Yessir, be a mighty brave story to tell when he got back to Washington. How he and just a cavalry lieutenant with less than thirty men knocked hell out of a couple of hundred hostile Indians.

Such a good picture that he brought out two bottles. He could see clearly, already, those complaining miners were just the usual run of never contents.

He'd mention a word for Biggs, too. There was a man to rely on! Yessir, a bit crude, but the cavalry knew how to take care of things! He'd cherish fond memories of that little frontier post.

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE BRONC STEALERS

A Stirring Novel of the Days of Belle Starr

By D. B. NEWTON

●

PLUS MANY OTHER EXCITING STORIES AND FEATURES!

"I'm Hugh Anderson—and I'm going to blow your head off!"

The Vengeance of Jim Riley

A True Story by NORMAN B. WILTSEY

JIM RILEY was one of the frontier West's tragic misfits—a scrawny, pathetic kid of eighteen; sick, broke and friendless. No, not quite friendless. Mike McCluskie, a rugged, hard-punching, straight-shooting policeman, was Jim's one friend. The hollow-chested youngster with the wistful lost-dog grin tapped some deep-hidden well spring of human compassion in tough Mike; prompted the hardy Irish cop to protect and support him.

Mike practically dragged Jim to a doctor to have him treated—though fruitlessly—for the hacking cough and persistent low fever that ominously indicated the presence of tuberculosis in an advanced stage. He rented a comfortable room for him, dressed him in new clothes and grub-staked him at a restaurant. Mike even bought the kid a fancy ivory-handled sixgun and painstakingly taught him to shoot; though cautioning him to always carry the weapon concealed in a shoulder holster inside his jacket and never to draw it on a man except in actual defense of his own life.

In short, Mike McCluskie treated Jim Riley as if he were the son he'd always dreamed of and never had. And Jim—well, Jim worshipped big, rough Mike as if he were the father he couldn't remember. He ran errands for Mike, lovingly cleaned his gun and polished his boots, talked eagerly to him when the gruff cop felt like talking and simply gazed at him in silent adoration when he did not.

Nightly, Jim accompanied McCluskie on his rounds through the hectic main street of Newton, Kansas, when he might better have been asleep or resting in his room. Mike knew the fool kid was riding hard on the down-hill trail, but that's the way he wanted it and so that's the way it was.

Mike had plenty to occupy him professionally, for in that single season of 1871 Newton was the wildest spot in the entire West. Directly succeeding Abilene as temporary "Cow Capital" of the flourishing trade in Texas cattle, Newton whooped and roared and prospered prodigiously four short months before the Santa Fé Railroad tracks pushed on to Wichita and left the town with only memories of its brief, lurid past.

Yet, in its fleeting inglorious heyday, Newton outstripped Dodge City, Abilene, Ellsworth and all the other hell-popping Kansas railhead towns shipping to Eastern markets the ever-increasing multitude of longhorn steers driving up the Chisholm Trail from Texas.

IN JULY of 1871 the railroad reached Newton, and saloons, dance halls and gambling joints mushroomed along Main Street; flimsy, false-front establishments bearing such grand-sounding names as "The Gold Room", "The Alamo" and "The Mint." Newton's sizzling red light district went by the graphically suggestive title of "Hide Park." Gun fights flared often in Hide Park over the greedy painted bawds; and such a sordid shooting scrape involved Mike McCluskie and Jim Riley on the night of August 11, 1871.

Earlier that day McCluskie had quarreled violently with Bill Bailey, a Texas gambler sporting a special policeman's badge, over a new and pretty dancehall girl favored by both men. That evening the two rivals clashed again in the Red Front saloon.

Bailey, drunk and ugly, demanded that McCluskie give up "his girl" and also set up the drinks to pledge his good faith. Mike laughed at him, and—when Bailey stubbornly reiterated his demand—belted the gambler hard across the mouth with the back of his hand. Staggered and insulted by the contemptuous slap, the jeers of the amused bar-flies ringing loud in his ears, Bailey reeled out of the saloon and waited across the street for McCluskie to emerge.

Mike leisurely finished his drink and stepped outside, accompanied by his faithful shadow, Jim Riley. Man and boy started down the street together—and suddenly the sharp-eyed youth yelled piercingly: "Across the street, Mike. *Bailey!*"

McCluskie whirled, the shattering roar of his Colt blending with that of Bailey's. Mike and Jim were untouched by Bailey's slug, but the Texan took McCluskie's bullet in the belly and died that night in the nearby Santa Fé Hotel with his "girl" weeping hysterically at his bedside. McCluskie and young Riley left town immediately to allow Bailey's cowboy friends time to simmer down a bit after the killing.

Thirsting for diversion and a shot of redeye, McCluskie drifted back to Newton eight days later on August 19. It was Saturday and past midnight when Mike and Jim returned to town, but the evening was still young and festive at Tuttle's rowdy dancehall in Hide Park. Untroubled by any premonition of impending doom, big Mike felt frisky as a young steer released from winter corral to open spring range.

Gayly he grabbed himself a fair partner and went stamping high, wide and careless around the floor to the live-

ly strains of an Irish jig played by the "orchestra" consisting of one fiddle, one banjo and a sadly battered piano. Properly, the jig should not be danced by a man embracing a partner; but rules didn't faze Mike. Holding the squealing girl well off the floor in the crook of one powerful arm, McCluskie jigged away like mad to shrieked applause.

Jim Riley leaned wearily against the wall, watching Mike's inspired performance, coughing now and then into a crimson-stained handkerchief. Jim failed to notice a young cowboy at the bar hurriedly toss down his drink and duck furtively out the back door at sight of Mike McCluskie.

HALF an hour later the cowboy returned with four heavily armed friends. He stalked straight toward Mike McCluskie, gun in hand, and halted before him. "I'm Hugh Anderson," he announced grimly. "Bill Bailey was my pal and I'm goin' to blow your head off!"

Desperately, Mike tried to draw—but Anderson's first shot tore through his neck and knocked him out of his chair. A second wasted bullet drilled the dying man dead center.

The sobbing high-pitched wail of Jim Riley rose above the shrill screams of the terrified girls and the hoarse shouts of stampeding men fighting to get out the door, or crawl behind the bar.

Suddenly the pitiful, heartbroken wail changed to a terrible sustained cry of berserk fury. Catlike, the puny consumptive leaped to the door, slammed it shut, braced himself against it and drew his gun—the fancy ivory-handled Colt of which he was so proud; the Colt Mike McCluskie had bought him.

Six times Riley fired—the rapid reports detonating like shotgun blasts in the closed, low-ceilinged room. At the sixth shot, a daring bartender jumped up behind the bar and hurled two whisky bottle at the coal-oil lamps overhead to plunge the room into darkness. Three more shots blazed from the vicinity of the card table in the corner. The gun thudded on the floor as the shooter collapsed.

In the stunned silence following the pistol fusillade, the back door was heard to open and close as somebody slipped out into the night. Men and women, crouching in corners and along the walls, rushed gasping and choking through a cloud of acrid gunsmoke to reach fresh air. Behind them, the nervy bartender who had smashed the overhead lights now lighted a wall lamp.

The scene that met the bartender's eyes was sickening, indescribable. Blood flowed everywhere, for nine men lay dead or badly wounded on the floor. Jim Riley was not among them. Hugh Anderson lay groaning beside the body of Mike McCluskie. Around Anderson sprawled his four gunmen: one dead, two shot through the lungs and dying, one gravely wounded. Near the five Texans huddled the inevitable "innocent bystander," gut-shot and retching horribly in his last agonized moments of life. Beside the upset card table, squatting among scattered poker chips, two luckier spectators tried dazedly to stanch severe but not fatal wounds.

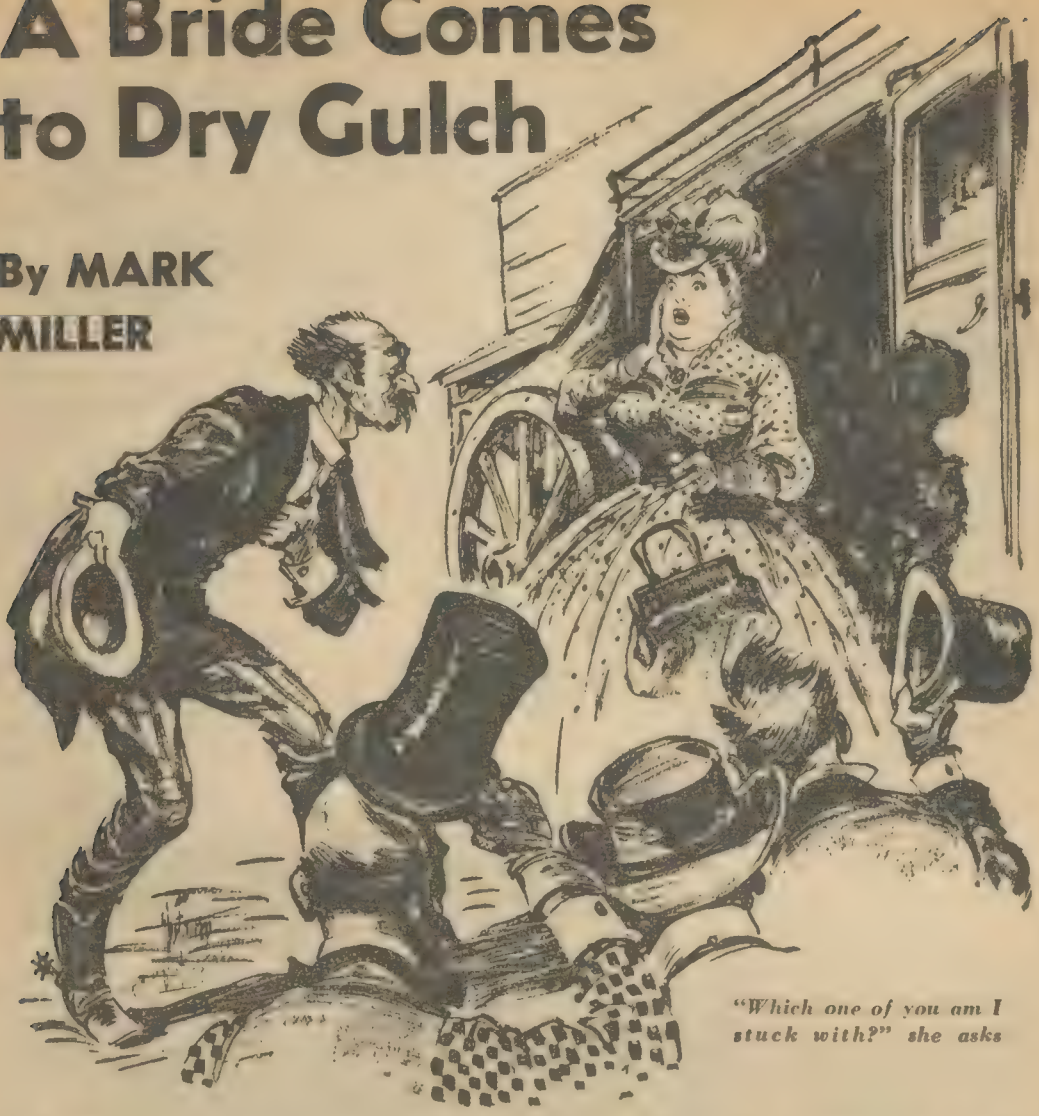
The entire miniature massacre had exploded, flamed and faded in less than thirty seconds from first shot to last!

Hugh Anderson was not mortally wounded. The many Texans sojourning in Newton rallied quickly to the stricken cowboy's aid, carried him aboard a train for Kansas City and guarded and attended him on the trip. At Kansas City, Anderson received expert medical treatment and eventually partially recovered.

Nobody knew what became of Riley after he slipped out into the night following the swift, savage gun fight at Tuttle's. More accurately, nobody talked. Somehow Jim got out of town and disappeared, and he could hardly have managed without help. Certainly he didn't survive long, even if he escaped unwounded. And just as certainly, that must have been okay with Jim, for without Mike McCluskie he wouldn't have cared to live anyway.

A Bride Comes to Dry Gulch

By MARK MILLER



"Which one of you am I stuck with?" she asks

ME AND the boys was sitting on the porch after supper when Maverick Mike starts airing his lungs.

"Skinny," he says to me, "as owner of this here shirt-tail outfit, I reckon you better hire yourself a new cook. Shuffle Foot John is getting worse ever dang day."

To which the other boys didn't say nothing and I knew right off they was of the same mind as Mike.

Old Shuffle Foot John had seen his day on the range. He blew in with the tumbleweeds a few months ago in need of a job and looking like he'd wintered on a hard range. John don't travel like a colt no more and his eyesight is getting so bad he can't hardly see through a barbwire fence.

But I ain't one to turn away an old-timer with wrinkles on his horns, so I ups and hires him to cook for us—five of us we are—and I reckon that there was a mistake.

Then Cactus Charley lets his tongue run plumb wholesale and says, "Skinny, look at them steaks old John slung at us night before last. That there machinery belting was so damn tough you couldn't cut through the gravy with a buzz saw. I ain't aiming to get my insides galvanized with that kind of grub."

I couldn't blame Charley none on account of when he bit hard into that steak he couldn't get his mouth open no more. One of the boys got a crowbar and pried his jaws apart, and there come three of Charley's teeth, still sticking in the meat.

Them boys give me a rough time but I didn't say nothing. I didn't want to turn old Shuffle Foot out to pasture, but I knew I was going to do something about it, else I wouldn't have no cowhands. It wouldn't have been so bad only John was forever getting the salt and the sugar mixed and stuff that should have come out sweet was plumb alkali. Then there was the time John put gunpowder in the chili, him thinking it was pepper.

That night I was thumbing through the mail order catalogue looking at the pictures of pretty women when all of a sudden I come to one who looks right back at me, almost winked at me she did, and I start getting ideas. That there woman was rigged out in fancy underwear. Stylish stout, the catalogue said, and danged if she didn't look right stylish. Nineteen ninety-eight, postage extra.

I AIN'T never give no thought to getting married on account of I ain't no prize, being skinny and gawky-like. And anyway, I didn't have much to offer a woman—just two thousand head of longhorn and eight thousand acres of range where a man can throw a rope without it getting caught on a fence post.

I ain't the kind that gets calluses on his hand from patting hisself on the back, but I have got me a right smart ranch house. And I got the only bath tub west of the Pecos. That don't mean too much on account there ain't no water to put in it, less a man wants to lug it by the pail from the crick. And anyway my cowhands is dead set agin taking baths, especially in them new fangled contraptions.

Right then I jump up and start looking for a pencil. I knew there was one around the house on account I'd seen it last spring. I finally found it in the kitchen where old John had wrapped a rag around it and used it to plug a hole in the water tank. So I sat down and wrote the mail order catalogue as follows:

> On page forty-six you got a pitcher of a woman in some fancy underwear which I like and which you got priced at nineteen ninety-eight. If your price includes that there woman, dang if you ain't made a sale. Inclosed is twenty dollars. You can keep the change.
>
> Yours truly,
> Skinny Beecham

I didn't tell the boys nothing about the letter as I figured ordering a woman from a mail order catalogue would kick up a fancy ruckus. Ten days later I saddle up and ride into Dry Gulch and sure enough, here was a letter which said:

> Replying to your recent letter, our price of nineteen ninety-eight does not include the woman who modeled the garments. We are therefore returning your remittance and suggest that you contact a matrimonial bureau.

Dang if that letter didn't make me hopping mad! Now ain't that gratitude? I spent a lot of money with them people. Only last year I spent sixty-nine ninety for lightning rods and we ain't never had a damn flash of lightning since.

So I sat down and wrote that catalogue another letter, telling them I didn't want no bureau as I already had a bureau which I bought from them two years ago and from which the bottom drawer don't pull out no more. I told them right plain I aim to marry me a wife, one of them nickel-plated widows that hankers to get her weeds plowed under. And would

they please ask that woman on page forty-six would she come to Dry Gulch and make marriage with me, if she can cook.

I still didn't say nothing to the boys, 'cept I was fixing to sign on a new belly robber soon as something right fancy come along. Gumbo Gus said it had better be sudden-like on account he got his mouth all cut up chewing on a spur rowel that got mixed in with John's stew.

It wasn't long afore another letter come from the catalogue and it said they turned my letters over to Minnie McDonald, who was the woman that modeled the underwear, and that Minnie was interested and wanted to know more about me.

Well now, that was more like it! I answered that letter right away and told Minnie all about me and my spread. I even promised to shave every day and told her there wouldn't be nothing in Dry Gulch good enough for her if she'd come. Of course there ain't nothing in Dry Gulch nohow, but I figured she would know what I meant.

Then I told the boys what I'd done. They was so surprised they all got lockjaw. Nobody said nothing for a long time, then Charley says, "What if she can't cook?"

THEN I got a whole herd of chills stampeding up and down my back like I was getting sick, and I couldn't say nothin' neither.

A little later Gumbo Gus says, "If she can't cook maybe you can trade her in on that suction pump you was aiming to buy, if she ain't plumb wore out by then."

Them ten days followed sure was torture for me and the boys. We got to thinking all kinds of things that could happen and none of them was any good.

Then come the big letter from the catalogue. It said Minnie had decided to accept my offer of marriage and would I kindly send one hundred dollars for transportation costs, handling charge, and so on.

Me and the boys held a pow-wow. A hundred dollars! Women was sure getting high-priced! For that kind of money I could buy me six razor-back hogs. The boys figured if she could boil water without scorching it, she'd be worth a try.

So I sent the hundred dollars, but there was one thing worried me plumb loco. What was that handing business? I told Mr. Catalogue he better not handle Minnie as she was fixing to marry me, not him.

It sure was a big day in these parts when Minnie stepped off the stage in front of Bleary-Eyed Bill's Skull Varnish Emporium in Dry Gulch. Me and the boys was all spraddled out in our low neck clothes. I got out my fried shirt and got me dressed up like a zebra. I even wore my hard-boiled hat which mice had been using as a nest over the winter.

When Minnie got off the stage I knew her right away from the picture. She took one look at us boys and turned a kind of sickly purple.

"Which one of you am I stuck with?" she asks, sort of depressed like.

I stepped up, took off my derby and bowed. Minnie swayed back and forth like she was going to faint, but the boys rushed in and held her up. We loaded Minnie in the buckboard and started for the ranch. I sent the boys out to the far section to brand calves so's Minnie could sort of get used to the place.

When the boys come back three days later I wrote a letter to the catalogue. Minnie got here, I told them, and I reckon she's good enough for me, but if she don't work out right I ain't never going to order nothing from you no more.

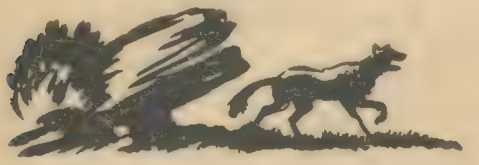
And by the way, Mr. Catalogue, where's that fancy underwear?

Read Our Companion Magazine THRILLING WESTERN—25c at All Stands!

QUESTIONS HUNTING

Question: Some fellows I know have a lot of fun digging out coyote and fox dens, and so make a little money and help conservation. I've tried to find these dens without much luck. How do you go about it?—Phil Humphrey, Scott's Bluff, Neb.

Answer: The digging out of coyote dens was a neighborhood affair in the early days of the west. The puncher who located a den with pups in it, gathered his friends about and made a sort of picnic out of it. Often the women folks went along with lunches. In the northern range country we were practically certain to have a storm of wind-driven sleet and snow in mid-May that sent the winter-weakened herds drifting from hell to breakfast. Riders chousing these cattle back kept their eyes open for coyote tracks in the snow, and followed them to the dens. Once the dens were located, they kept an eye on them until pups were seen about the entrances. Then the party began.



Dens of both coyote and red fox are usually found on high points with good visibility in all directions. The gray fox, however, hides its den in brush, as a general rule. If there is no tracking snow late in spring, the best way to locate dens is to comb the high ridges for freshly used holes, and keep an eye open for animals that may lead you to them. Finding the gray fox's dens at whelping time is a chore I've never been able to figure out. Dogs do no good, for the animals will not run to the den when pups are in them.

Question: I have good success in tossing wet and dry flies with my five ounce rod, but can't get any distance with bass bugs or artificial lures. If I try for distance I get a wreath of line around my neck, like the veriest dub. What can I do to perfect my technique in this?—Barett Turner, Green Bay, Wis.

Answer: You give your weight of rod but not its length. I'd imagine that at five ounces it would be about eight and a half feet in length. The ideal rod for bugs and small plugs should be around six and a quarter ounces. The line should be heavy enough for the rod, in weight HCH taper, or number six Torpedo. If a level line is used it should be C, normally, for this weight of rod. In casting bugs and lures with the fly rod the entire action should be slower than when tossing flies, with more power used. Pick up slower, with gradually increasing power, wait longer for the more wind resistant lures

to straighten out behind you, and start your forward cast slower, with ever increasing power. The double hand haul may help you in this, pulling the line sharply down with the left hand as you pick up line, releasing it at the end of the back cast, pulling down sharply again as you come forward, to give more power. You should be able to get fair distance with your five ounce rod if the bugs and lures are not too heavy. If you get a heavier rod for this, get it in nine feet.

Question: I am thinking of buying an outboard motor for use on waters that vary from small lakes to fairly large ones, placid rivers to fairly fast ones. No white water. What horse power motor should I buy, among the many different powered motors that are on sale?—Clyde Throckton, Albany, N. Y.

Answer: If you'd asked me this question five years ago I'd have surely recommended a five horse job. Now I say that you should select a motor in the seven and a half horse bracket. The reasons for this change of view are quite obvious. A few years back anything larger than a five horse would not troll slowly, and weighed more per horse power than motors do today. Anything up to fourteen horse, and even larger, will troll in modern motors. Weights have been reduced. The additional two and a half horses will be appreciated in getting across the larger lakes and fighting current in faster rivers, yet will be as light as the five horse of back years.

Manufacturers of outboards have recognized the values outlined here. Where the general product of a few years ago was rated usually at one and a half and two horse for the small jobs, five for the general use motors, jumping to ten and larger for speed jobs, most manufacturers are now putting out motors powered between five and ten horse for average use on all types of water.

Question: I wish to buy a compact camp outfit, to be carried in a boat or in my car, that will give me enough comfort in camp so that my wife will like to go along. The way I go now, she tells me, is not fit for a hedge-hog.—Clarence Chilton, Ogden, Utah.

Answer: I had the same trouble with my wife, pal. In camp you require, whether your wife goes along or not, the same comforts you have at home. You wouldn't need these, perhaps, if you were hardened in to camping out every day. You can grit it out, of course, but I take it that you are out for pleasure, not to prove how tough you are. At home you have an insect proof shelter, a good bed, good cooking fire, plenty of light at night. You get all this in camp with a small, floored tent, a sleeping bag with air mattress, a gasoline cook stove of the folding type, and a gasoline lantern, that will not only light your camp, but heat the small tent on chilly evenings. These items are basic

for camping comfort. It took me a long time to come to them, I'll admit, but when I finally did, I wondered what the heck I had been doing all those years, sleeping on the ground in tarp and blankets, stumbling around in the dark, cussing the rain down my neck.

Question: Can you tell me how game birds, such as ducks and pheasant are spitted and broiled over a camp-fire, without using elaborate equipment?—Verling Finch, Hartford, Conn.

Answer: The bird is cleaned and stuffed in the usual way, rubbed liberally with salt and pepper. Two tripods are made by tying three sticks together at the tops, the tripods being about three feet high when the legs are close together. A green, peeled stick is thrust through

the bird, from rear through the neck. With the bird suspended over the fire, which has been allowed to die down to hot coals, the legs of the tripods are pulled apart to lower the meat, or thrust together to raise it, to keep it at a distance from the coals where the heat is about what the hand can only momentarily stand. The bird is slowly turned until nicely browned. It is then basted with salad oil until done, turning occasionally. Large fish can also be cooked in this manner, but with strips of bacon in the cavity. This is food for kings, believe me.

Question: When fishing for bass with surface lures I seem to miss more of my strikes than I should. When the water explodes at my lure I give with the old heave-ho, but often no dice. Friends tell me that I'm striking too fast, taking it away from the fish. What is your opinion?—John Bartlett, Atlanta, Georgia.

Answer: I do not think you are striking too fast. I think that either you are striking too slowly, or that you are encountering those exasperating specimens of bronzeback that often have me muttering angrily in my beard. They swirl up behind the lure, purposely striking short, just to see you jerk, and let you know you're not fooling them with phony minnows. If you are hooking fish well on some trips, missing them on others, I'd say that it was short striking bass. If you miss with regularity on all trips, I'd say you are striking too slow. A bass takes and releases a lure instantly. You've got to be on the ball all the time. I'd check the hooks on my lures, to make sure that they are needle sharp, and I'd fine down my leaders, to make sure the bass are not spotting them at the last moment and turning away. —F. H. A.

Tally whipped around, pitched the Winchester to his shoulder

Andy Singleton's struggle with himself was tougher than the grim four-cornered battle for bank loot in the ghost town!

THE DAMNED DIE

I

THE moonlight fell upon the cowtown of Exile like a mystic unearthly dawn. It patterned ugliness into beauty. It gave common things—the lurching slant of Lukitter's livery stable, the blistered front of the Exile Saloon, the bold façade of Jeff Minnird's new bank—a symmetrical glow of wonder. It fell upon Andy Singleton's long thin hands as he hunched in the shadow of the hotel shed rolling a cigarette, lending the awesome suggestion that they moved without arms.

OLD

A Novelet By G. DAVISSON LOUGH

Out front in Lark Street a rider passed, his horse at the gallop. The sound was thunder in the dead quiet; and the stillness crept back hesitantly. Afterward it was so quiet that Singleton heard the tobacco of his quirly complain as the sucked smoke caused it to expand.

He had hand-cupped the match in lighting up, focusing its glow upon his strange dark face, hoping if Mrs. Meedville was at the window of her hotel room she would give him a chance to talk.

Behind the shed in the alley one of the horses—it would be old Sack, he knew—began pawing restlessly. The sound fomented the impatience that was already a hot flicker at the pit of his stomach. She wasn't going to raise the window. She wasn't going to give him a chance! He drew in a long, tight breath slowly, threw away his cigarette. He found himself afraid to doubt her, afraid to believe that she had lied.

What would Sam Meedville say if he failed him, failed to deliver this woman? He'd seen Sam club men to unconsciousness for less. He'd seen Sam—

He remembered suddenly to remind himself that he wasn't afraid of Sam Meedville now, that he'd changed in these two years Sam had been in prison. Now he wouldn't stand for bullying from Sam or anyone else. He'd kill or be killed first.

For a moment he saw himself locked in combat with big Sam Meedville. The picture was strong and clear, even prophetic. He closed his eyes against it, drove it away with thoughts of himself—his bony, gangling figure, his pale skin that not even the desert could tan, his inability to feel at ease in the presence of men, and how always his shyness was taken for surliness and he was resented. He remembered the bitterness, humiliation, mockery these things had brought him, and knew it would always be thus, that he would never fit in.

PROBABLY at that moment Louise Meedville was up there peeping from her window, laughing at him for a fool, a poor silly fool, because he was waiting, as she believed, with saddled horses to take her away from danger.

Andy-Andy-long-legs! Andy-Andy-long-legs!

He winced, remembering how when a kid at school the other kids had hooted those words at him, had come after him in a mob, throwing stones.

He told himself, I'm always despised. Always. Am I to blame if I throw in with Sam Meedville and his owlhooters? Isn't it high time I turn on them, strike back? Isn't it?

Above him a window creaked, as if in reply, a thin long-drawn *No-o-o-o.*

"Andy!"

He stood still in the shadow, staring up, hating her, the woman who had betrayed his friend, Sam Meedville, who had talked him into prison, who had divorced him when he was behind bars.

She put her hands on the window-sill, leaned forward, and the swell of her full breasts, half hidden by the lacy top of her sleeping garment, rose and fell visibly.

She was dressed for bed; she didn't intend to go with him. Something rose in his throat—a fist of anger. He went to the wall beneath her in four swift strides.

"Oh, Andy!" she said. "I thought you weren't coming."

It was a long reach from ground to window-sill, but he was a long man. She put her hands over his as he gripped the sill. When their faces were on a level she arched her neck and kissed him in the mouth. While their kiss held he threw a leg over the sill and thrust his long body forward.

"No!" She twisted her lips off his. "No, Andy!" But she threw her arms around him as he stepped into the room.

They held each other tightly and kissed again. Her dark hair fell down about her face in a sweet loose warmness. He held her close, then strained her to him, the passion that stunned his body

momentarily ungoverned. In that moment, for the first time since he'd come to Exile to deceive this woman, he forgot his debt to Sam Meedville.

She pushed away from him, said huskily, "Andy, it's true! Sam *has* escaped from prison. It isn't just a rumor—it's true. The sheriff sent word. What shall I do, Andy?"

"What we planned," he said. "We'll ride out tonight. Your horse is in the alley, saddled. Hustle now; get yourself ready. It'll be three days and nights on the jag. And it's rough."

"To—to the place you said? The old mining town?"

"Yes," he said. "Sam'll never find you in Solomon City. It's a dead place, a ghost town. Sooner or later Sam will be killed or picked up and sent back to prison. Then we'll come out into the world again. We'll be married."

She moved deeper into the room. A shaft of moonlight, reflected in the mirror of the dresser, fell upon her face and he thought, how lovely she is! How like a delicate flower that grows in some quiet and shaded place. And he hated her for many things—her beauty, her guile, her strange talent for making him feel that he possessed honesty, goodness, self-respect.

She was as blind to the truth in him as she had been to the truth in Sam Meedville. He was an outlaw, or soon would be. He was washed dirty of decency. He was her worst enemy, her deceiver.

For the past month he had made love to her as a chore for her divorced husband. Sam had even given him hints as to the most effective methods, pointers to short-cuts to her heart. Now when she had come to trust him he was going to deliver her up to be punished. Sam would whip her good. Sam would slash the clothes off her.

Andy smiled to himself in the darkness. It did his heart good to think of it.

TALK Sam into prison, would she? Take Sam's love and his money for a year, then when she learned he was an owlhooter, go blabbing to the sheriff, would she? He'd show her!

He could hear her now— "Oh, Sheriff Branegan, my husband's a road-agent! My husband's a bank-robber! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

He remembered all the women who had hurt him, played around with him while he had plenty money to spend, then laughed in his face, and the bitterness they had caused was transferred to Louise Meedville.

Sam Meedville's last words to him, spoken through bars, came back— "She needs to pay for what she did to me, Andy. You put her in my hands and half of everything I own is yours, including an even divvy of the Raymondville Bank loot."

Half the Raymondville Bank loot would amount to something like fifteen thousand dollars. He could have himself a real high time on that kind of roll.

Finished dressing for the trail, carrying a valise, she came to him from the darkness, gripped his arm. "I'm ready, Andy."

He took the valise, put a leg over the window-sill, leaned and looked out. "I reckon Sheriff Branegan told you to stay in your room?" he said.

She nodded, her small fragile face a pale freshness in the moonlight. "He said he'd put a guard outside my room—for me not to worry, they'd get Sam before he got me."

"Using you as bait," Singleton said in disgust. "Seems a tough laddie-buck like Sleepy Branegan could take a man without the help of a woman."

He slipped from the window, spoke to her from the ground, whispering, "Just skoot over the sill on your stomach, hang by your hands and I'll lift you on down."

She obeyed without hesitation. He put down the valise, clasped her knees loosely. She let go the sill and slipped down into the circle of his arms.

"This gives the sheriff the slip," she whispered, laughing, a little out of breath.

For a moment as they stood close, the

quick trip of her heart hard under his, he wanted to kiss her, hold her and hold her and kiss her.

He let her go, picked up the valise. "The horses are in the alley," he said.

She took hold of his hand.

Leading old Sack, the pack-horse, on his left, he could have reached a hand and touched her at any moment as they rode out of town. She was an expert rider. Dressed in levis, a man's shirt and *wampus*, wearing a man's hat, she looked like a strip of a boy there in the moonlight.

Looking at her his own boyhood came back—a skinny, dark-faced, lonely kid hazing burr-tailed cows on his father's little cuss-and-go-hungry spread down in the Territory.

"You, Copperhead! Watch that calf, damn you!"

He flinched remembering the brutal *thump* of his father's fist against the side of his head. His father had always called him Copperhead because of the strange pale darkness of his skin. Neighbor Culpepper's little brat of a daughter had called him Indian Andy for the same reason. But he didn't look like an Indian, and he'd hated her for it.

A mile north of town he stopped to fill the canteens. The spot was a short gully below Grady's Bench. The spring was a hole in a bank, a sick trickle slipping from a wooden pipe.

"Dry in the mountains," he said, squatting with a canteen in his hand, looking up at Louise. "Likely the springs this side of the Rallies are all gone."

SHE started a reply but a crackling of brush, two looming figures in the shadow, stopped her, turned her first word into a gasp. Singleton put down the canteen, stood up facing two men who walked side by side toward him.

They were big men, one remarkably so. Their faces sprouted a week's growth of beard. Singleton recognized them as saddle-bums, drifters, hardcases, guessing their horses were back in the brush.

"Howdy," the shorter one said, grinning up at the woman. The other one eyed the pack-horse with the look of a man who had found what he needed most.

They wore guns, holstered low. The taller one carried a cocked Winchester in his right hand.

"Just ride out from Exile, did you?" he asked.

Singleton nodded.

The man swung the Winchester around indifferently. Its muzzle stopped a couple of inches out of line with Singleton's middle. He glanced up quickly, a cunning twist to his face.

"You're Sam Meedville's woman, I reckon, ma'am."

Trouble was the last thing Singleton wanted now. But he saw it coming. These men knew Sam was on the loose, knew he could be located by anyone in a position to hand him this woman. They knew more than that, as was evidenced by the speaker's next words.

"Sam Meedville will pay plenty to get his hooks on you, I figure. Might be he'd even be willing to turn over the Raymondville bank money he's got cached somewheres."

The Winchester was steadied now, its hard dark eye gazing at the middle of Singleton's chest.

"Seems you're somewhat in the way, Singleton," the tall man said.

II

SO THEY knew him, too. They'd probably been hanging around since Sam broke jail, waiting for something like this to happen. Perhaps they were a couple of Sam's old riders, owlhooters left to hang and rattle when Sam was sent up. Singleton saw their intention with sharp clarity, knew he wasn't mistaken. They meant to use the woman to get money from Sam.

He said, "Maybe I'm taking her to Sam. Maybe Sam won't like it if you try to stop me."

The man with the Winchester laughed, a hard, spouting sound. "Hear that, Nimshy?" he said. "Hear what Single-

ton says—as if we didn't know that's the very thing he aims to do."

"Walk him back in the brush, Tally," the man called Nimshy said.

Singleton wanted to look at Louise Meedville, watch her face as the possible significance of the tall man's words made itself clear. But he kept his eyes on the Winchester.

Nimshy laughed, said, "Don't take it so serious, ma'am. After all, Sammy used to be your loving husband."

Tally said, "It won't make any difference to Sam who brings her to him."

"It might," Singleton replied, wondering if it would.

After all, what was he to Sam Meedville? A man in trouble, fighting with his back to the wall against too great odds. That's all he had ever been to Sam, and that day was long past. Sam had saved his life then, asked him afterward to join his band. He had refused, still believing in the fraudulent platitudes—honesty, decency, goodness. Then, in prison, Sam had sent for him, reminded him of his debt, told him how he could square it and earn a nice reward besides.

He'd listened to Sam with the mockery of a Denver dance-hall doll still a barb in his brain. Lottie Yarnley, smiling blue eyes, soft golden hair. He had fallen hard, hind-end over tincups, for Lottie; and she had laughed at his proposal of marriage. A cheap dance-hall floozy! Hating Lottie, he had listened to Sam.

"You got a green nature and a green skin, boy," Lottie had said. "I've only been selling you what you've been getting. Don't be a cheap sport and ask me to marry you."

There was a long line of Lotties behind him—beautiful betraying babies. And here sat another one on the saddle of her little gray horse, looking at him like a little girl might look at the dribbling froth at the end of the bubble-pipe after the wonderful, beautiful bubble had burst.

Tally said, "Let's you an me meander back in the brush, Singleton."

He must act now. Now! Always at the showdown it was like this for him—fighting odds, rushing drawn guns, never an even break. This time maybe would be the last, this time maybe he wouldn't find his luck at the tag end of the string. He drew a long, loose breath, then let the proper parts of him tighten.

He told himself, I'll make as if to obey, then move fast—fast with my gun—fast and moving in low between them, putting each in the other's line of fire. And maybe—

At that moment Louise Meedville cracked spurs to the gray. It reared, whirling, and dived off down the gully.

Tally whipped around, pitched the Winchester to his shoulder. He wouldn't shoot the woman, of that Singleton felt certain. He would try for the horse.

The man called Nimshy clawed for his gun as the Winchester was jerked off Singleton. Singleton overmatched his motion and shot him between the eyes.

Tally whirled back. There was no time to lever a fresh shell into the Winchester, so he speared with it, hooking the gun from Singleton's hand. Singleton rushed him, grabbed his throat with both hands.

TALLY fought to hold on to the rifle. Singleton knew the right trick here—to cling close, as close as blood. He wrapped both legs around Tally's thighs. He struck down with his head and sank his teeth into the tall man's cheek and ground them deep. Tally screamed and dropped the Winchester, hand-thumbed his thigh for his sixgun.

Singleton drove his hands deep into the throat flesh. He tore his teeth from Tally's cheek, blood spurting into his face. He dipped his head, banged it against Tally's mouth, got it under Tally's chin as the big man clubbed him with a left hand ineffectually. Tally gave a gurgling yell as Singleton slashed his teeth into his bearded dewlap.

He felt Tally's gun rake his ribs and struck down hard with his left hand. The gun roared. He couldn't tell whether he was hit. He brought up the free hand.

clubbed it savagely into the blood-sopped face. Then he was working his knees, pistoning them up and out, driving for the groin first with one, then the other.

Tally was done—a slack load in Singleton's hands. He let him fall, then fell on top of him, pumping fists into the unresisting face. He kept at it, his blows growing weaker and weaker, until he fell exhausted, Tally's face cushioning his heaving chest. . . .

Louise had got away. She knew what he was, what he was after, and she had got away.

Andy wondered how long he'd been lying there half-conscious, whether she'd had time to ride into Exile and find Sheriff Sleepy Branegan. If she had, then Sleepy was on his way here now, riding with a deputy, a rifle in his hands.

He wondered what charge Sleepy would rap him with when he locked him up—kidnaping, maybe? He tried a sour grin, and it came with the pain and disappointment in him, a stiff grimace.

Sam would be one for the devil to hold when he learned he'd let her get away. Sam would start raving, boiling to take his disappointment out on some living thing when he knew. And maybe that living thing would be Andy Singleton.

He kept his eyes closed, thinking of the bullet that might be in him, going carefully over each member of his body with probing separate thoughts. At last he sighed. The bullet was not in him.

In a few minutes he'd get up and fill the canteens, get on his horse and ride. But where to? To Solomon City where Sam was waiting?

"Why'n hell does he want her so bad?" he mumbled. "Why can't he take what she handed him, count it a gain in experience, and let her alone?"

He shook his head slowly, his eyes still closed. Sam would never let her alone. Sam didn't have it in him to forget a wrong.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the moon, then let his head roll and looked at the dead men. He got up, his legs wobbly-heavy, and went to the spring, washed the blood off his face and hands, and took a long slow drink. He was filling a canteen when the sudden ring of iron on stone caused him to dip his hand, straighten up with leveled gun.

What he saw coming up the trail was to him, strangely, like a slap in the mouth. He put down the canteen, releathered his gun, stood watching, his thoughts all a-jumble.

Suddenly she saw him, rapped a spur, came in riding fast.

"Andy! Forgive me, Andy! I shouldn't have run away and left you to face them alone. I—I'm a coward, I guess."

"Coward?" he said. Surprise made a dragging mumble of his voice. He shook his head. "No, you came back. I reckon that took a pile of nerve."

She came quickly off her horse, ran to him, touched his face with fingers as cold as new ice. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head. "Not too much, I reckon."

She glanced at the dead men, quickly looked away. He heard her teeth click twice, saw her chin tremble. He touched Tally's boot with his toe.

"He was about to shoot your horse. You did the right thing, breaking for it like that. It scattered them for a second. Thanks for saving my life."

SHE came in close, put her arms around his neck. "Don't thank me," she said. "I was afraid. All I thought of was to get away as quickly as possible. I meant to ride back to town. But—but I couldn't. I—I had to come back to you."

He stood there confused, arms slack at his sides, looking down into her upturned face. Finally he said, "You heard what they said. Do you believe it?"

"No! Not now. I did at first, but not now."

He started to say it was a lie, that he wasn't taking her to Sam Meedville, and it wouldn't make. It was glue in his mouth, a stone in his throat.

"We'd better be moving along," he said. "I'll bury those two. You fill up the canteens."

He scooped out a shallow trench in the sandy loam of the gully, using a frying-pan from his pack as a shovel. He placed the bodies in it, side by side, folded their hands on their chests, then rocked back on his heels and looked over his work.

It wasn't much shucks as a grave, but after he shoveled in the loose dirt and rolled on some stones the varmints wouldn't be able to get at the bodies. It was better, he thought, than they would have done for him.

Finished with it, the stones in place, he removed his hat and stood there a moment looking off at a fold of dark cloud that hung like a dropped handkerchief above the high end of Grady's Bench.

Turning around suddenly he caught Louise studying him, her expression tender. He was ashamed, not knowing exactly why.

"My father was a no-good drunkard," he said. "Somebody shot him down and left his body lay. I found it after the buzzards did. A man ought to rate some security in death, seeing as he rates but little while alive. Even a no-good hard-case like my father."

She went over and mounted the little gray, not speaking. He gathered up old Sack's lead-strap and mounted the blue roan, wondering if she had noticed the teeth marks on Tally's cheek and throat.

He told himself, she's suspicious now. She's a little afraid of me. She came back because she was afraid to ride on to town alone.

And he believed it, believed it because it was impossible for him to believe anything else. He couldn't picture any woman running this risk of falling into the hands of such men as Nimshy and Tally for the love of the likes of him.

He thought to try her out, see how she felt about going on with him now, and he said, "Let's give it up, Louise, and go back to Exile."

He didn't mean it, of course. He meant to deliver her to Sam Meedville, see that she got what was due her. He was shocked and confounded when she said:

"No, Andy. I'd rather go on to where we started. I trust you."

He humped in the saddle, feeling he

WESTERN TIDBITS

The other day a small band of Mexicans, coming across the Arizona-Mexican border illegally, were startled by some 60 "Arabs" coming dashing across the plains on horses. The startled Mexicans turned and fled back across the border. What they didn't know was that the "Arabs" were just Hollywood "extras" making a movie near Yuma.

■

Perhaps the nation's most destructive fire in recent years was a four million dollar loss of 56,000 acres of forest and 28 buildings on the El Capitan Indian Reservation, Conejos, Calif.

●

The sheriff of Provo, Utah, is after a new jail. He says the present one is too close to a railroad. In a recent escape, the fleeing inmates just stepped from the cell block and jumped aboard a passing freight train.

●

Whataya mean, lo the poor vanishing American? The Cherokee Indian tribe now numbers more than twice what it was when the white man first showed up.

●

Jody, son of Western Movie Star Joel McCrea, recently won a steer-roping contest at a rodeo.

●

Nevada is the most skimpily populated of all the states—there are less than two persons per square mile there, according to the latest census.

By HAROLD HELFER

could never look her in the face again, and tickled the blue roan's ribs with an easy spur. She rode in at his side, her knee brushing his. Old Sack gave with a disgusted whinny, proclaiming that he didn't fancy the smell of fresh blood.

They rode up out of the gully and out along the wall of Grady's Bench. An impulse to tell her the truth drove Andy sorely.

III

AT MIDNIGHT they made camp at Crazy Water Spring, ate a light meal and took turns standing watch. The sun was two hours in the sky when they took to their saddles again. They rode until midnight again, stopping twice to eat a cold snack, rest and water their horses. When they talked it was of commonplace things—the scenery, the weather, how the springs in the foothills seem determined to outlast the dry spell.

They camped the second night at Mammoth Oak, in sight of the high ridges of the Rallies. Singleton stood first watch. Louise was asleep by the time the cook-fire had died out. He sat by the cooling ashes, hearing the rise and fall of her breathing, wondering how she really felt about him.

Once he caught himself wishing he wasn't in on this business. His feeling for Louise had changed. At first he had wanted her with passion, now he wanted her with his mind. And that was wrong. It troubled him.

He didn't wake her when her hours were up, but let her sleep until dawn. She awoke with a start, sat up staring at him with bright fear in her dark eyes. Then, in a moment, she smiled and relaxed.

"Golly, what a dream!" she said, faking a shudder. "Why, it's breaking day! Why didn't you wake me, Andy?"

"I fell asleep," he lied. He rekindled the fire, put a pan of water on to boil. "You'll want breakfast," he said. "I'm going to hit the hay."

He was asleep almost the second his head touched his saddle. It was noon when he awoke.

That night they camped at Lost Poke Wells. The following night, at midnight, they rode across Big Table Ridge flat and looked down on the ruins of Solomon City.

In the moonlight the town looked primly fresh. Singleton pointed out places along the wide street that might interest her—the Queen of Sheba Mine buildings, the Ten Thousand Drinks Saloon, the Wisdom Bar and Dance-hall.

"The only building still weather-tight is that small one opposite the Ten Thousand Drinks," he said. "It used to be Chinee Chuck's laundry. You'll live there, Louise."

It wasn't a lie, but it hurt his throat saying it. She would live there, all right, because Sam was living there, waiting for her. Chinee Chuck's was the center of the old hide-out; somewhere there the loot from the Raymondville Bank was cached.

She laughed, sounded amused. "I never thought I'd live in a laundry, Andy."

Her expression was little-girl-like, all wonderment and pertly anticipating. He turned his head to hide a strangeness he felt taking hold of his face, a tightening of the skin and a drying of the lips. He rode over the break, onto the cliff trail. Old Sack momentarily balked at the sheerness of the down-away, then down and along as nonchalantly as a goat.

Louise put the little gray after them, saying, "Is this the only means of getting into the town?"

"Now it is," Singleton replied. "Used to be a dug road up the other wall of the basin, but landslides covered it over long ago."

"Then we'll notice if anyone decides to pay us a visit."

"Sure will," he said. "Unless we're asleep."

Sam was noticing them now, he thought, watching them with a twitching grin on his long, crooked lips, a hot

light in his heavy-lidded wide-apart eyes.

Andy told himself, one thing. The beatings he mentioned are out.

He was strangely nervous as they rode out on the level at the bottom of the wall past the assay office of the Queen of Sheba. There were fresh horse tracks along here, and he hoped Louise wouldn't notice them.

"It's a ruins all right," Louise said. "But in a way it's cozy. It's something we'll never forget—our stay here, I mean."

He managed to say, "How could we?" Then his senses went dead to everything but the thought of Sam Meedville, and he didn't hear the rest of what she said, gay remarks about the ghostly surroundings.

WOULD Sam ask him to leave the the basin? In that case, would he go? Would Sam fly at her in violent rage the moment she faced him? If Sam did, he didn't know what he would do. Sam wasn't Nimshy or Tally. Sam, aroused, was a vicious savage, but an easy-going gentleman otherwise. Andy didn't know.

They halted in front of Chinee Chuck's laundry, his heart a pulsing wedge in his throat, aware that if he could have foreseen how he would feel at this moment he would never have brought her out of Exile.

"So this is Chinee Chuck's laundry?" Louise said, smiling. "Why, Andy, it's nice."

"Don't dismount until I take a look-see," he told her as he left saddle. He went over and pushed open the laundry door, stepped inside. Nothing happened. He fired a match, looked around, saying in his mind, all right, Sam, don't prolong it. Come on out and surprise her. You're the last person she expects to see here. I've fooled her, damn me, and good.

The match went out, the shadows gathered like grouping ghosts around him. "Sam," he whispered, "Sam!"

"Andy! Come out here, Andy!"

An alarmed urgency in Louise's voice brought him quickly into the open.

"Andy, there's a man there, coming along the street."

He started to say, "I know—it's Sam," but saw in time that it wasn't Sam, and said, "I see him. Wonder what he's doing here?"

"Oh, Andy, it's all going to be spoiled."

"Maybe not," he said hopefully.

He walked out and stopped a few yards in front of Louise, watching, waiting. The man came on, taking his time. The moonlight drew a soft glitter at his thigh—a gun slung low and tied down. He was a rather small man, slight of build. He came out of the shadow of the Ten Thousand Drinks Saloon, crossed the street, and lifted a hand in greeting.

Singleton returned his salute. One moment the man was a stranger, the next, an old acquaintance as the moonglow dabbed his hard, thin face.

"Hello, Singleton," he said, stopping some six feet away.

"Hello, Ornie."

He glanced inquiringly at Louise. "Like old home week, what? Nice. I'll bet you wasn't lonesome coming in."

They spoke in tones too low for Louise to hear. Singleton said, "Sam here, Ornie?"

"Andy, I was afraid you'd ask that."

"Is it a hard question, Ornie?"

The slender man nodded. "Like which came first, the chicken or the egg. Who's the doll?"

"Sam's ex-wife."

The slender man chuckled softly, eying Louise through slitted lids.

"What about Sam, Ornie?"

"Stogie Smith's here, Andy. Remember old Stogie?"

"Good," Singleton said. "I remember Stogie real good."

He was guessing it now. Ornie Shaymale and Stogie Smith, two of the smoothest, meanest operators of Sam's old bunch. Sam had got word to them somehow. They were here to meet him, or they were here with him. Something was up. Up high.

Without turning his head, Singleton spoke to Louise, told her to get the lantern from the pack, take a look around inside the laundry.

"I'll be with you in a little while," he said. "As soon as I stake out the horses."

She didn't question his instructions, for which he was thankful. A moment later he heard her fumbling with old Sack's cumbersome bundle.

HE SAID to Ornie Shaymale, "Sam's expecting us. Where is he?"

"Don't hustle me, Andy," Shaymale said, chuckling again. "I'm going to tell you about Sam. First I want to tell you about me and Stogie. We're here for pay —the Raymondville Bank booty, money we helped Sam steal and didn't ever see. We know Sam cached it here somewheres. When we heard Sam escaped from the pen, we figured he'd bee-line it for here to get his fingers on the bank loot. We came on ahead to act as a kind of reception committee. Sam got in yesterday. He's down the street here now inside the Temple Bank. He feels bad, Andy. When people get in his sight he shoots at them." Shaymale laughed solidly. "You here for a whack at the bank booty, too, maybe?" he asked slyly.

"No," Singleton told him. "I got no claim on it. I didn't help steal it."

"Honest, ain't you? Just why are you here?"

"To give Sam a chance to talk things out with his ex-wife."

Shaymale nodded, seemed satisfied. "Want to introduce me to the lady?"

"Not tonight. Tomorrow maybe."

Shaymale grinned. "All right, tomorrow'll do. See you around, Andy. And, by the how, boy, for once in his life Sam's a loser. This deal busts his clock —busts it wide open."

He turned and walked away down the street, taking his time. Singleton went back to the horses. He'd unsaddled them, was pulling the pack off old Sack when Louise came out of the laundry.

"Plenty grass here," he said. "That's why I'm staking them out for tonight."

He carried the pack into the laundry. Louise followed him.

She'd lit the lantern, hung it on a rafter. "It's nice," she said. "Of course, it'll take a bit of tidying-up. But in a couple of days you won't know it from the little rose-covered cottage, except there won't be any roses. Not in the beginning, anyway, but we may have them later on."

She laughed; he didn't. After a moment of silence she frowned, said, "Andy, you knew that man."

He nodded. "It's been a long time since I knew him. Name's Ornie Shaymale. He's one of the guys who used to ride for Sam.

He saw that she was troubled and trying not to show it. "The stove's in fair shape, Andy," she said. "You carry the wood and we'll have a cooked supper."

He nodded. "Yes, there's plenty of wood around."

He went out and picketed old Sack near the laundry, led the little gray across the street and left it in the open lot beside the Ten Thousand Drinks Saloon, then led the blue roan down toward the bank building.

According to Shaymale Sam was in the bank, ready to shoot at anyone who put in an appearance. That meant Ornie and Stogie had attacked him and he'd taken refuge there. Now, likely, Ornie and Stogie were watching the bank, one of them in the hotel, the other in the Wisdom Bar—at least those were the ideal points of vantage for covering the bank.

He staked out the blue roan a half-block from the bank, then went on, walking in the middle of the moonlit street. He was almost two blocks from the laundry when he stopped in front of the bank and called to Sam.

"It's Andy, Sam. Andy Singleton."

There was no reply. He walked on, climbed the rickety stoops to the bank's gallery, crossed over to the hole in the front wall that once had been an ornate doorway.

"Come in, Andy," a voice said from inside.

IV

HAND on gun, Singleton hesitated. It didn't sound like Sam's voice.

"It's all right, Andy. This's Sam."

He went in then, still doubtful, and found Sam Meedville propped up on two chairs beside the front window. A rifle lay across the big owlhooter's thighs, a Colt's Peacemaker .44 lay on the windowsill.

"Couldn't come and bow you across the threshold, Andy," Meedville said. "Shot up some's the reason. Both legs—rifle balls. Stogie and Ornie bushwhacked me yesterday as I rode in. Been holed up here most of the time since. Glad to see you, boy." He drew a long ragged breath, then asked, "Lou with you?"

"Yes," Singleton said.

"Thanks," Meedville replied. "Only I reckon it's too late."

"You'll be all right, Sam."

"Reckon not, Andy. Wounds are infected now. I'm packing a bit of fever, too. Got the sickness that goes with it. I'm as hungry as a hound and as dry as a thistle. I won't be able to hold out much longer." He was quiet then, for a long moment. At last he said, "Feel of my hoofs, Andy."

Singleton felt down in the darkness. A coil of rope lay on the floor near the window. He touched that, then one of Sam's feet. He grunted with anger and amazement, stood up.

"Burned?" he said.

"Fried brown," Meedville said, chuckling mirthlessly. "Matches at first, then when I didn't tell them where the Raymondville Bank money is, and they saw it might take a long time, they used candles."

"You got away afterwards?"

"Crawled out back to their horses and got these guns and a piece of rope, then crawled back. That happened while they were gone, looking in a place I said the money was. They didn't think I could stand it to move with my shins busted and my feet roasted, but I fooled them. 'Course I lied about the money, and when they came back and missed the guns and the rope they didn't come on in here, as you can reckon."

"You'll come out of this all right, Sam," Singleton said. He didn't believe it, but it was something to say.

Meedville gave with the dry mirthless chuckle again. "This is the end of the pike for me, son. I'm sorry Lou's here now. I've been doing a heap of thinking in the last few hours—hurting and thinking. Lou did right turning me in to Sleepy Branegan. I lied to get her to marry me. For the year we lived together I lived a lie. When a feller looks at old hell's fire a burning, feels the scorch of it on his face, he gets to swapping ends—in his way of thinking, I mean."

"Why didn't you tell them where to find the money?" Singleton asked. "It would have saved you those burned feet."

"It would have killed me dead," Meedville replied. "You think they'd bushwhack me, steal from me, then let me live, knowing me as they do? You know better than that."

"No, I reckon not."

"Besides, I want Lou to have the bank loot. You think she'll accept it, Andy?"

"No."

"No? No, I guess she won't. She's a sticker when it comes to being honest. With people like Lou honesty is a disease. But I was thinking—you reckon if you had the money you could eke it out to her piecemeal, sort of, without her knowing where it came from?"

"I might," Singleton said. "What makes you believe I wouldn't keep it for myself?"

"You do a thing like that?" Meedville laughed roughly. "Maybe you don't know it, son, but you're suffering with the same disease as Lou—honesty."

"You think I would bring her here to be whipped if I'm honest?" Singleton asked.

"Sure. If you thought she had it coming to her, as you did."

SINGLETON didn't reply, but he thought, he knows that whatever I thought before I don't think Louise should be whipped now. He's guessed what the making love at Exile, the ride out here, did to me.

"I'll fetch you a canteen, something to eat," he said. "I'm going to tell Louise you're here. She'll want to help you, take care of you until you're well again. I'll not be gone long."

"You think you won't, but you will," Meedville said. "Lean your noggin close here to me, Andy, till I tell you where I hid the bank money."

Andy moved closer, and Sam told him quickly, then fumbled with a hand in the dark, found Singleton's hand and gripped it.

"You're a funny gink, Andrew," he said, chuckling softly. "Some fellers are born honest and nothing can change it. What do you think of Lou?"

"She's fine."

"Sure. Fine and dandy." He paused, holding onto Singleton's hand, then went on, "Stogie and Ornie'll let you leave here, but they won't let you come back. They'll blast you down if you try it."

"If it wasn't for Louise I'd stay."

"I know that." Meedville squeezed Singleton's hand, let it go. "I'm not all bad, Andy," he said huskily. "Remember me sometimes as—as you knew me sometimes. I never abused a horse or any critter. I never turned lily in a pinch. I never put a hand in anger on a woman or a child. That goes for Lou. Honest. I never gave her a mean word until I was in the pen. Then I wrote her some nasty threats. But that was the bars and the walls talking. The bars and the walls and the sound of the breathing and hoping of the damned—the sound you never hear, just feel. And the hunger that crawls in your cell and snags at your vitals, the hunger for a slap of clean wind in your face, a saucy saddler between your knees, and the smoke of some drover's cook-fire in your smeller when the dusk is planting God's posies in the sky."

He paused, was silent for a long moment, then chuckled softly, reaching out a thick, stout-fingered hand and stroking the long barrel of the Peacemaker on the window-sill.

"If I was to live to invent a gun, Andy," he went on, "I'd invent one that shot from both ends the barrel, so's it'd kill the feller what was shot at and the feller what did the shooting. Wouldn't be many gunslingers if there was guns like that, would they?" He chuckled again, slow and dry. "Think of me kindly sometimes, eh?"

"It won't be hard to do, Sam."

"Thanks." He rasped a slow breath. "Ain't this hell, a feller like me having to go this way? I never wanted it like this—hiding in the dark to fight. 'Course I always liked banks." He chuckled again. "If I'd had my choice, though, I'd have picked me a wide street in some lively town with a lot of excited folks looking on, a couple of hardcases coming for me, and me standing there with my old blow-doolies in my fists, reared back, a-squinting and a-cussing and a-talking to my bullets. That's the way I always wanted to go flopping off to glory. But a feller don't get his way most times, like the sheepherder said when he looked across a pair of deuces at the tinhorn's four aces."

He picked up the Peacemaker, forefinger in the trigger-guard, twirled it in a shaft of moonlight. It became a shining circle in front of his hand, with his hand seeming motionless. The gun's parts were entirely indistinguishable. Then suddenly it jumped to a dead stop—a glistening blue horn pointing streetward through the window—and roared, ribboning a stream of yellow and red.

A tin can in the middle of the street seemed to find life, jumped in the air, whirling crazily, struck the dirt and rolled.

"Just to let'm know the bank's still paying dividends," he said, and laughed.

HE SAID, putting the Peacemaker down, "Another thing. I don't like

to die barefooted. It ain't decent, somehow. But my feet's burned too sore to take my boots." He was silent for a long time, then added, "Well, Andy, you better hit it off back to Lou. And watch her close, son. Get her out of here quick. They'll lay off her while they're thinking about the money, but later—"

"Hold out as long as you can," Singleton said, moving toward the door. "But I guess I don't need to tell you to do that."

"Thanks, Andy."

Singleton walked out on the bank's gallery, looked up and down the street. He was going down the stoops when Ornie Shaymale called to him from some hiding place across the street.

"Don't try to tote him any victuals and drink, Andy. And don't try to take the woman and leave the basin."

Andy paused, looked toward the sound of the voice, stared that way a moment, then moved silently down into the street.

From behind him somewhere another voice said, "No tricks, hombre. We're keeping our eyes peeled."

That would be Stogie Smith—old Stogie, the flash-draw ace, who boasted of breathing more gunsmoke and being missed by more bullets than any man alive. Andy wasn't afraid of Ornie Shaymale, but thinking of Stogie Smith a small, cold needle stitched a seam along his spine.

He gathered an armload of wood on his way back to the laundry, wondering if he'd live to see the wood burn. When he came in Louise was busy scrubbing Chuck's little counter, expecting it to serve as a dining table, no doubt.

"How many others are there here, Andy?" she asked, not looking up from her work.

"Two besides Shaymale—a gunfighter, name of Stogie Smith, and Sam."

She continued to scrub the counter, not speaking or looking up. He'd expected her to drop the brush, whirl around, at the mention of Sam being here. But he was wrong about her again. When she didn't stop scrubbing, didn't speak, but let the seconds pile up with only the swish of her brush to fill them, he said:

"Now you know what a dog I am."

And he told it all to her, beginning with his visit to Sam in prison and ending with his leaving Sam at the bank. When he finished, standing there feeling a little ill, with sweat turning cold on his face, she said:

"Were you an outlaw with Sam and these men—before? Were you, Andy?"

"No. Never."

She put down the brush, came to him, put a hand on his arm, looked him directly in the eyes. "Andy, do you love me?"

"Yes," he said.

"When did you start loving me?" Her fingers plucked absently at his sleeve, her eyes held steadily on his.

"At our second camp coming here, while you were asleep. I didn't doze off like I said. I stayed awake the whole night, listening to your breathing, looking now and then at your face in the moonlight. But I have no right to talk like this to you. I'm a dog. I fight like a dog. I think like I think a dog thinks. I'm a damned man, damned from the day I was born. All along I've taken the wrong chances and won the wrong prizes. I—I don't know how to tell you about myself. I—"

"I love you, Andy," she whispered, and folded herself into his arms.

He kissed her face, her neck, her hair, was kissing her when the gun rapped against his backbone and Ornie Shaymale's slimy voice said:

"We've figured a new trick and need your help. Put up your hands, Andy. You, Mrs. Meedville, come along, too."

ORNIE took Singleton's gun, told them to walk outside. "Go side by each," he said. "We're going to the bank for some money and need you two for security." He laughed thinly.

Stogie Smith was waiting outside, a stump of a stogie in his puffy mouth trailing a blue tendril of smoke across

his heavy flat-nosed face. He held a lighted lantern in his left hand.

"Howdy, lady," he said, nodding comically to Louise. "See how we figure it?" he asked, looked at Singleton. "With you two walking close together in front of us, Sam ain't likely to start popping his cannon. But if he does start shooting, well—" He winked at Singleton, pursing his fat mouth around his stogie.

They walked slowly down the middle of the street, Louise and Singleton forming a shield for the outlaws. Shaymale called a halt when they reached the bank, then called out to the man inside.

"We're coming in, Sam. You hear?"

"And you're going to say where the money is," Stogie Smith said, "or we aim to give the lady the same treatment we gave you."

There was no reply. At a word from Shaymale they moved inside, passing through the door side by side, two by two.

V

THE chairs by the window were empty. The rifle lay on one of them, but the Peacemaker was missing from the window-sill. The only place in the room where a man might conceal himself was inside the big iron safe in the corner.

"He got away," Stogie Smith said in wonderment. "On them fried feet!"

"He's inside the safe," Ornie Shaymale said. "The door was open when we was here last. Now it's closed. He's inside it with a gun."

"Yes-s-s-s," said Stogie Smith. "The cute old varmint wants to play hide-and-seek with us, Ornie."

Shaymale's gun rapped Singleton's back, *tap, tap, tap,* as Shaymale said, "Now keep your shirt on, Andy. Stogie's going to start by twisting Mrs. Meedville's wrist. If she squalls loud enough and Sam gives out with what we want to know, then that's all. We won't hurt her no more."

Stogie Smith said, "You hear that, Sam? You hear it, all right. If you'll speak up now we won't have to twist her wrist even."

Sam Meedville answered then, from above their heads, the Colt's Peacemaker speaking from his fist. Shaymale gave a short grunt, fell against Singleton's back and onto the floor. Singleton, whipping around, saw Stogie Smith throw a shot ceilingward and throw the lantern.

The lantern crashed against the wall, went out. There was a whizzing sound, then a thump as Sam Meedville struck the floor in a tangle of rope in front of Louise. The Peacemaker flew from his hand, bounced when it struck the floor. Singleton swept an arm, caught it in the air, positioned it, pivoting.

Stogie Smith was gone. Singleton ran to the door. The street was empty in the moonlight. He went back to Louise, who was kneeling over Sam Meedville.

Sam, his voice thick in his throat, was saying. "Had a rope. Pitched it over a ceiling beam, hauled myself up, when I saw you folks coming. I was hanging up there all the time. Should have shot Stogie. My second bullet was named for him, but my hand slipped and I fell."

"Sam—oh, Sam!" Louise was crying softly.

"It's all right, Lou," Meedville said. "It's all right."

"Did Stogie hit you, Sam?" Singleton asked.

"Did Stogie ever miss, Andy?"

Singleton felt for Meedville's latest wound, found it in the chest, and knew it was a death wound. It was bleeding profusely.

It was a long moment before anyone spoke, then Sam Meedville said, "You think one little kiss'd matter, Lou?"

Louise lowered her head and kissed him on the whiskered cheek.

"For old times," he said. "Lou, I wouldn't of whipped you. I wanted you here so—so maybe we could patch things up. But I know now it couldn't have worked out."

"Sam, I thought when I turned you in that being in jail might change you, and that when you came out we could start

with a clean slate. If you hadn't written those—those awful letters I wouldn't have got a divorce."

"It's all right, Lou," he said, his voice almost a whisper now. "Andy'll see to it the bank gets the money back. It's all right, honey."

He was quiet for so long they thought he was gone, then suddenly he rallied, rolled his head, said, "Andy, my boots! Over there by the window. Get them, put them on my feet."

He groaned as Singleton slipped the boots onto his burned and blistered feet, telling Andy to go on, get them on quickly. He sighed with relief when he was sure they were on, rolled his head again and began muttering.

"His mind's wandering," Louise whispered, feeling for Singleton's hand, holding it tightly.

MEEDVILLE began talking loudly, talking about the bank money, saying over and over where he'd hidden it.

"Under the floor of Chinee Chuck's laundry!" he yelled, thumping the floor with his fists. "In an old Wells Fargo strong-box. Buried there! Deep!"

Suddenly he stopped yelling, drew a long breath, shuddered, and was still.

"He's gone," Louise said. She held his hand to her cheek, began crying softly.

Singleton rose, walked to a window, glanced out. He ached to take Louise in his arms, speak comforting words to her, but felt it was better that she be alone with Sam for a few minutes. He put his hands on the window-sill, stared out at the street, then came erect, muttering a quick oath.

Stogie Smith had been listening to Sam's ravings. Andy had glimpsed the man backing away from the wall of the bank, disappearing around the corner of the blacksmith shop next door.

Without speaking to Louise, he ran from the bank. Stogie came from an alley in the next block, running hard toward the laundry. Singleton turned into the alley beside the blacksmith shop, crossed an open lot, and came up to the laundry from the back.

He heard Stogie inside, saw light thread a crack in the wall as Stogie fired a match. He ran along the wall to a window, looked inside. Stogie was examining the floor, crawling on hands and knees, his gun in his right hand, a flaming match in his left.

Singleton crashed the glass of the window with the barrel of his gun, yelled:

"Stogie, drop your gun!"

Stogie whiffed out the match, scrabbling around like a big crab in the moon-tinted darkness to face the window. Singleton fired, knew he'd missed when Stogie's gun racketed, flashing. The bullet smashed Singleton's shoulder, slammed him back from the window.

Stogie fired again. Singleton started to run, then turned back, belatedly realizing that the only safety lay in getting in close to the laundry wall. He dived for the wall and Stogie rose in the window, firing a bullet into him at close range.

Andy pitched forward, tumbled, fell along the wall and landed on his face in the dirt. He lost his gun in the fall, was raking the ground for it when Stogie scrambled through the window and landed on his back.

"I hate to do this, Andy," Stogie said, clubbing down with his gun.

The blow glanced off the side of Singleton's head, rapped his shoulder. Guessing that Stogie's gun had jammed, Singleton reared up like a sunfishing bronco. Stogie, clubbing wildly with his gun, went high in the air. Singleton came free, straightened, and struck the gunfighter in the stomach with both fists. The blow drove Stogie back through the window.

Singleton clambered through the window after him, rammed him with his shoulder as he came off the floor, grabbed him by the hair as he reeled backward. Stogie lost his gun, clutched Singleton's neck with both hands. Singleton let go Stogie's hair, clawed for his face, raked an eyeball, and the gun-

fighter screamed. Singleton drove his right then, smashed it against Stogie's neck.

Stogie flailed both fists, bawling oaths. Singleton hit him again with the right, in the face, then grabbed his throat with both hands. They went across the room and out into the street with Singleton shoving, throttling.

Midway of the street Stogie tripped and fell backward. Singleton went down on top of him, straddled him and clubbed the man's bleeding face with both fists; clubbed and clubbed it as Stogie, gasping for breath, struggled and screamed.

Suddenly Stogie's cries became a rasping gurgle, his struggles a spasmodic jerking. The last Singleton remembered he was still driving his fists into Stogie's bloody face. . . .

ANDY SINGLETON thought he was awakening from a restless, miserable night after being beaten and sent up to the loft to bed by his father. It seemed he smelled his old shuck mattress, damp and moldy from being rained on through the leaky shingle roof.

He'd been branding a maverick last night while his father held a burning stick smeared with pitch for a light, and he'd run the iron too deep, pouching the maverick's flesh through the hide.

His father had kicked him in the back for it, then beaten him with the firebrand and sent him up to bed.

He'd lain awake a long time, the welts paining him, thinking about his father, himself, and how wrong it was for him to submit to such discipline, how he couldn't bring himself to accept defeat and failure, how he always wanted to win at everything he turned his hand to, and how it hurt him when he lost or made a mistake. He wanted to be loved, truly and deeply loved, and he had never been. Now he despaired of ever living such a blissful experience.

"I'm done with it," he mumbled. "I'm getting out. He doesn't care if I live or die. That maverick was a paper-skin. It wasn't my fault the iron went too—"

"Andy! Andy, darling!"

He opened his eyes and Louise Meedville's strained, hopeful face bending over him brought him back.

"Stogie Smith!" he said. "I got to get Stogie. He—"

"He's dead and buried," Louise said.

"Dead—and buried?" He stared at her. "Who buried him?"

"I did. At first it was the rats, then the buzzards. I had to bury them."

He looked past her, recognized the ceiling of Chinee Chuck's laundry.

He said, "I got Stogie, huh?"

"I found you and him side by side out in the street. He was dead."

"And—and you buried him? Ornie and Sam, too?"

"Yes. I found a shovel at the Queen of Sheba and— It took all day."

"Why," he said, reaching for her hand with the hand that would move without causing pain, "that was rotten of me, lying here on my back in this nice bunk while you was out there—"

He saw she might start crying and drew her close.

"How long have I been here?"

"Two days and a—a night. Andy, you were shot in the shoulder, twice. Until the fever broke and you stopped muttering I was sure you were going to die!"

She buried her face against his chest.

He patted her shoulder, then hugged her close. "What's a couple of little bullets in old Andy's shoulder?" he said. "I'm going to live forever. You just hang around and see."

"I—I'm going to, Andy."

"Going to what?"

"Hang around."

He smiled across her shoulder, his strange pale face brightly happy, smiled at the past and all the wretchedness and bitterness that had been a part of it. Since Louise had moved in there was no room for any of it in his heart now.

"The damned die old," he told himself, repeating a favorite expression of Sam Meedville's. Then he added, whispering it for Louise to hear, "The loved live forever."

"Kinda late for funerals, ain't it, Tom?"

THE GLASS BALL

By FRED DELANO

The reward offer looked phony to the two-bit rancher—so he decided to call the bluff!

BILL WHITLOCK, in town now for only the past ten minutes, thoughtfully considered the reward notice, freshly posted on the front of the Big Slide Merchantile Company's store building. The words "Dead or Alive" had caught his attention, and the size of the reward offered held him motionless for a brief time.

Five thousand dollars, so the notice said, would be paid by Emmett Peterson, President of the Big Slide National Bank for the capture, dead or alive, of the person or persons who robbed the bank and killed the cashier, Roy Cowley, on the night of August 4th. All presently available information, the poster indicated, could be obtained from Ben Terry, Rock County sheriff.

Whitlock rolled a cigarette. He picked a match into flame with a thumbnail, took a deep drag of smoke, and his troubled gray eyes narrowly sifted the poster once more.

He thought, bitterly sarcastic, now, ain't that something! "Five thousand dollars! Sure beats billy hell how Emmett Peterson can pay that much for a dead man, when a live one like me can't borrow a nickel at holdup rates to stock his ranch, even with cattle down like they are now."

He turned his back on the sign and walked to the edge of the street, thinking, wondering about the peculiar turns of fortune's wheel, and the world's strange variety of human impulses.

"But I guess Emmett would like to see me go broke and have to sell out," he mused. "No room in the country for little men. Got to be big, like Emmett and his brother Tom. That's a pretty pair."

The reward offer was news to Whitlock, but he had heard about the crime yesterday morning. Tom Peterson, riding from Big Slide to his ranch on Finger Creek, had stopped at the Whitlock ranch for a drink of water and had informed Frieda Whitlock of the sensational robbery. Frieda had told Bill when he'd come in from mending fence.

"Cowley had been working late," Tom Peterson had said, "and they found him on the floor of the bank this morning. Right side of Roy's head had been caved in and the bank vault had been cleaned out. Emmett is sore as hell."

SURE, Whitlock thought, losing money was bound to make Emmett sore. And then he recalled the time, two weeks earlier, when he'd tried to negotiate a loan from Emmett Peterson.

"Sorry, Whitlock," Peterson had said, "but money is tighter'n a bull's hide in February. With beef prices dragging the bottom, we've got to play it close and weather the storm the best we can."

"But I wanted to buy stockers," Whitlock explained, "and a low market's the best time to do that."

"Quite right," Emmett Peterson had agreed. "But that's also what makes it impossible for me to loan you the money. As you know, all the big cattlemen in this section are stockholders in the bank, and it's simply a mutual agreement to protect one another from pinch buying. Personally, I'd like to extend you the credit, but—" He'd wrapped his watch chain around one pudgy forefinger and shrugged. "Well, you see how it is."

Whitlock had seen, and did see how it was, all too plainly. He had been operating on a shoestring for years, trying to get his ranch on a paying level, and it was discouraging to watch opportunity go kiting out the window. For Whitlock knew where he could buy a fine lot of mixed cattle that would pay off big, given a couple of years on his good grass, and with a rising market—if only he had the money to buy with.

He moved along the sidewalk now to the shade of a big cottonwood and stopped. He felt a little sick when he thought of that disappearing opportunity. And Frieda, struggling along without a single complaint, had been planning on a new house in two, three years, if everything went well. The robbery of the bank now seemed like some sort of just retribution. The dirty, penny-pinching—

Right then, Bill Whitlock's mind began to buzz with a variety of thoughts. If Emmett Peterson were a penny-pincher, he reasoned, why was he offering the fantastic sum of five thousand dollars for the apprehension of this killer-robber? Bill found the answer to be double-barreled. Either the bank presi-

dent was not a penny-pincher, or he didn't expect the robber to be captured. The first half of that answer Whitlock discarded immediately, but the second half had him stumped. If Peterson didn't believe the robber could be captured he would have a reason—and what could that be?

The longer Whitlock chewed on that the bigger the query got. In a mounting tingle of excitement, he finally decided that the reward offer was a bluff, and that he would call it! He needed that five thousand. And Roy Cowley had been his friend.

A hazy plan of action began to form in Whitlock's mind. Then he moved out of the shade and up the street toward the Blue Goose restaurant. He was hungry and thirsty after his ride in from his little ranch on Fat Woman Creek, but decided to have a drink first, so he angled across the dusty street to George Buford's saloon.

Some of his cronies from his bachelor days were there—Bert Risk, of the Bar Seven, Juan Diego, of the Singleton's S O, and Herb Honeycutt, a driver for the Big Slide-War Dance stage line.

"Now, here's a man," Bert Risk said, when Whitlock walked in, "who can tell us who killed Cock Robin and stole the cookies."

Honeycutt grinned. "Give the fellow a drink, Buford," he said, "before he dries up and blows away."

Whitlock placed a dusty boot on the bar rail, the easy friendliness taking away some of his bitter thoughts and putting him in a jovial mood. Juan Diego, the Singleton ramrod showed white teeth and slid the whisky bottle along the bar toward Whitlock's callused brown hand.

Diego chuckled. "First time Bill's been off the Fat Woman in a month, I'll bet. He must be wore to a frazzle by now, poor feller." He glanced around, but nobody laughed, so he tried again. "But being stuck on the Fat Woman so long you wouldn't know who killed what for which, would you, Bill?"

WHITLOCK swallowed his drink, and shuddered at its impact on an empty stomach. "Stuff like that," he said, shaking his head and looking at the proprietor, Buford, with an offended stare, "would give a man rigid mortals." He turned to face Diego. "What's this about this bird with the cookies?"

"Somebody killed Roy Cowley night before last," Diego said, "and cleaned out the bank vault. Emmett found Roy when he went to the bank about ten o'clock. A hell of a note."

"Bert here thinks you're the smartest man in the country, Bill," Honeycutt said, "so maybe you can tell us who killed Cowley and drained the money jug."

"Make it purty, Bill," Bert Risk encouraged. "Part of the Bar Seven boodle was in that cache, and I reckon Singleton had a dab in it, too."

Whitlock looked soberly at the badgering group. To hell with you monkeys, he thought. All right, you asked for it.

"Sure, I know who it was," he drawled. "A left-handed man. At least I figure he was left-handed, to bust the right side of Roy's head like that. But maybe he done it from behind." He tilted the bottle over his glass, filling it, but Juan Diego pulled the glass away. "No, Bill," he said. "That stuff has give you the whips already." He peered into Whitlock's face. "Say, how come you know all them things—about Cowley's head being busted on the right side, I mean."

"Yeah," Risk said curiously, "you just got in town. How did you know?"

Whitlock retrieved the glass from Diego's lax fingers and tossed off the drink. He glanced carefully around and then leaned closer to Diego. He whispered, "I have a big glass ball out to the ranch that I play with when I'm not milking my goat. I may give you more information after awhile, but right now I'm hungry and I'm going over to the Goose to get fed. I'll see you sheep-shufflers later."

He backed out of the saloon and crossed the street to the Blue Goose, where he hung up his hat and ordered a steak. While he waited, he put to-

gether a cigarette and smoked and drank coffee.

I got a good start, he thought, and them railbirds will sure spread the news. Maybe I laid it on too thick. If they didn't know me they'd think I cleaned that cache myself. I could sure use the money, Lord knows.

Whitlock's steak eventually arrived. He ate, paid his bill, and went out onto the street, not sure how to proceed with his plan. But he had a few errands to do, and when he had finished with them he drifted back to Buford's.

Diego and Risk and Honeycutt had gone, so he sat down at one of the card tables. He put his feet on the table, tipped his hat over his eyes, and leaned on his hip pockets while he waited for inspiration to strike.

Inspiration struck in the form of Sheriff Ben Terry. The officer, lean and gray and a little weary from years of chousing lawbreakers, came in and leaned a white-shirted elbow on the bar. He was, so Whitlock overheard, exactly falling to staves, and George Buford rose to the occasion. Whitelock also arose and strolled over to the bar.

"Hello, Ben," he said. "You catch yourself a bank robber yet?"

Sheriff Terry looked at him sharply. "Say, listen," he said, "if you're trying to amuse me, just forget it. I've been tickled like that so much the last two days that I'm mostly irritable—very most irritable. I'm not going to take much more of that."

Whitlock clucked his tongue sympathetically. "That's too bad," he soothed. "Now, if I was sheriff, Ben, I'd just go right on out and collar that hardcase and bring him in. No use making a big fuss over nothing."

Terry turned on him angrily. "Bill Whitlock, if I was as smart as you think you are I'd—" But he didn't finish what he'd started to say. He seldom did. Terry was never able to think of an appropriate simile, or come up with a properly cutting retort, being a man of little speech and lots of action.

BILL WHITLOCK grinned at him. "Ben," he murmured, "your ears sure get red quick. Now, as you was saying—"

Terry glowered at him. "Bill, do you know something about this bank business that I don't?" he asked.

"He knows everything," Buford cut in. "Says so himself. He's got a glass ball he looks at, and that makes him a sort of a professor or something that milks goats. Go ahead, ask him yourself, Ben."

"Now, now, Buford," Whitlock chided. "You know, Ben, I'm sort of bashful about telling things out of school. Besides, I'd rather get me that reward money all by my own high lonesome. Maybe you better go get tickled some more."

He started back to the card table, but Sheriff Terry caught him by the arm and swung him around.

"Wait a minute," he snapped. "Listen, cowboy, if you know anything you'd better not hold out on me or I'll throw you in the pokey for obstructing justice."

Whitlock jerked loose and backed away. "Why, Ben," he said fretfully, "you're all balled up. If you throw me in the pokey I'll get amnesia, sure as a tick will climb a cow's leg, and then neither one of us will know anything." He slid his hat to the back of his head and looked Terry over coolly. "But I've got an idea that might work. You put one of them deputy badges on me and then the law will have all my information—only I'll be the law. How about it, Ben?"

Sheriff Terry stared at Whitlock for a long moment, then nodded, plainly reluctant to make any concessions, but facing a situation that allowed only one logical choice. He reached into his pocket and produced a badge which he pinned securely to Whitlock's dusty vest.

Whitlock admired the badge in the mirror of the back bar and then asked Terry anxiously, "Is everything legal now, Ben? I'd most completely hate to

bring in an unauthorized corpse."

"Why, sure, my soon-departed friend," Terry said acidly, "you're a real deputy. Now hurry and go get yourself killed. I can hardly wait." He snorted and swung away from the bar.

The sheriff left Buford's without a backward glance and Whitlock regarded the batwing doors until they stopped quivering. Then he looked at the saloonman and grinned.

"George," he said, "I'll hunt up the boys and we will fittingly celebrate my coming demise. There sure is nothing like a glass ball to make life interesting."

Two hours and ten drinks later, Bill Whitlock shoved the bar away and edged toward the door, ignoring the entreaties of Risk and Honeycutt and Diego to have just one more round. He couldn't forget Frieda, nor could he longer ignore the disagreeable aspects of his self-imposed task. All the fun had faded away.

"No, boys," he said stoutly, "I've got to go. I like this rassling around, but I can't play any longer. Nothing shall dim the glory of justice or stay this limb of the law."

Juan Diego followed him outside and walked down the street with him. When they had gone a short distance, Diego laid a delaying hand on Whitlock's arm.

"Bill," he said anxiously, "you shouldn't have put out all that talk about a glass ball and who robbed the bank. You don't really know who it was—now, do you?"

Whitlock shook his head. "I ain't got one little idea, Juan," he confessed. "But when I go fishing I bait the hook with anything I damn please. In this case, I'm using me."

"Yes, and that makes you anybody's meat," Diego growled. "If I was the guilty party, I'd take a pot shot at you from the nearest cutbank. I would bust your little whistle right pronto." He sighed and started on down the street. "I sure don't aim to do any apologizing to Frieda. I'll ride with you."

"Now, you whoa right up," Whitlock protested. "I got into this alone and I'll whittle my way right on out again. If you boys go wet-nursing me, I'm going to be most unreasonably offended. And that is for sure."

JUAN DIEGO lifted his shoulders and waggled his hands in despair. "All right, Bill," he said. "I give up. But if you don't show in a couple of days I'm going to start dragging the dry gulches. I'll walk with you to the livery barn."

It was nearly five o'clock when Whitlock paced his lanky gray down Big Slide's main street, heading for open country and the Fat Woman, eighteen miles to the south. As he passed the bank, Emmett Peterson and Sheriff Terry came out and stood on the sidewalk talking. Whitlock raised a friendly hand in passing.

"Howdy, Emmett," he called, but did not slacken his pace.

The bank president scowled and grunted a reluctant answer. From the corner of his eye, Whitlock saw him turn quickly to Ben Terry, but he could not hear what passed between the two. He had a strong suspicion it concerned himself.

He thought, looks like I've got myself on Emmett's number two list. But the observation gave him no anxious concern. Friendship in that quarter had long been a tenuous thing.

He left town and wound down the looping trail into lower country, and as he went he carefully put together various bits of information he had gathered. Some pieces seemed to be missing, he concluded, or else he was putting them together wrong. Besides, he was a damned fool to get mixed up in the affair. If it hadn't been for Frieda's dream house, and that bunch of cattle he wanted, and a dozen other material and spiritual pressures he'd been under for a long time, he never would have started this damn thing.

And Juan Diego was right about the prospects of a new widow on the Whitlock ranch. His glance constantly scoured the beetling hills, whose every

fold was a potential source of sudden death; and he occasionally left the trail to skirt terrain particularly favorable to sudden flank attack.

When he dropped over the divide onto Fat Woman Creek, the western sky was sea green and the deep coulees airy slots of disagreeable purple shadows.

Lights glowed at the house, and Whitlock reached the stable by a circuitous and unaccustomed route, feeling downright silly having to approach his own dwelling like a furtive ghost. Before leaving the stable, he removed the deputy badge from his vest. No use scaring Frieda. Or becoming involved in difficult explanations.

Supper was still warm. Frieda, always attentive, poured hot water into the wash basin for him and fetched a clean towel. Whitlock admired the picture she made, as the lamplight shone on her black hair, the gentle touch of her hand, and the lingering fire in her eyes. It was good to be home, and he let Frieda know it was good to be home.

When he was eating at last, she said, "Bill, did you find out any more about that trouble at the bank? Has Terry been able to do anything?"

"Nope," he said. "Except that Emmett's offered a five-thousand-dollar reward for all and sundry—dead or alive."

Frieda looked at him in surprise. "But why such a large reward? That's almost unheard of! And so quickly, too."

"That's what I've been thinking," he said. "Sounds loco."

"Well, the Petersons are odd people," Frieda said thoughtfully. "When Tom stopped here yesterday morning, he walked right into the kitchen without knocking. I was putting bread in the oven, and I was so startled I almost dropped the pan."

Whitlock set down his coffee cup and regarded her carefully. After a moment he said, "How long does it take bread to bake?"

"Oh, about an hour. Why?"

"And did I have hot bread, right out of the oven, when I came in from fixing fence yesterday?"

"You did. But what's that got to do with the subject we were discussing?"

Whitlock reached over and patted her hand. "Why, everything, honey," he said. "If you hadn't baked bread my glass ball wouldn't work."

Frieda looked at him dubiously. "Bill, darling," she said, "I think you're crazy."

"That's what I am," he chuckled. "Yes, sir, sure as God made little apples, I'm looney as a coot. I most certainly for sure am."

WHEN he was in that mood it was almost impossible to get a straight answer to any question. But before Frieda could try again there was a jingle of spurs on the porch and a knock at the kitchen door. Whitlock opened the door and Juan Diego walked in, blinking in the sudden light, and apparently not expecting this domestic scene.

"Brother," he exclaimed, in obvious relief, "have I been worried about you! I run my pony's legs off getting here. Why, he's practically been galloping on stubs for the last three miles. Bill, I'm glad you're all right."

"He's just admitted being looney as a coot," Frieda scoffed. "Actually, I believe you both are."

Whitlock was shaking his head vigorously behind Frieda's back. Diego caught the danger signals.

"Well, you see," he explained, "Bill's been talking funny all day—about glass balls, and going fishing, and stuff like that, and I thought—Frieda, you sure you didn't marry a sheepherder?"

"Ah, shut up, Juan," Whitlock interposed, putting on his hat. "Come on, let's take your horse to the barn."

Outside the house, he said to Diego, "All right, Juan, what's the rip?"

"Bill, I think you had trouble on your tail all the way home. After you pulled out from town, Emmett Peterson rode in this direction like the mill tails of hell. I wasn't taking any chances, so I fogged after him. What do you make of that?"

"I guess it was trouble, all right.

I know now for sure who killed Cowley and robbed the bank." Whitlock lit the barn lantern and Diego led his horse into the stable. "Put your saddle on that pinto," Whitlock said. "I want you to go along."

Diego's black eyes were inquiring in the lanternlight as Whitlock lifted his saddle from its peg. "We're going over to Finger Creek." Whitlock said. "Tom, or Emmett, killed Cowley."

Whitlock and Diego were easing down the black prairie's slope toward Peterson's T P ranch buildings when a gunshot broke the night's stillness. The two pulled up and listened, but there was no more firing. They moved on until they came to a pole fence surrounding the buildings and stopped again. Someone came from the stables carrying a lantern and moved across the open to a clump of box elder trees beyond the house. It was too far to tell what was going on.

Whitlock dismounted. "Wonder how many there are around the ranch," he speculated. "You guess, Juan."

Diego threw off and led his horse forward. "Probably none," he whispered, "except Tom, and likely Emmett. Risk says he saw the crew moving toward the river yesterday. They're taking over a herd of mixed stuff that's coming up from War Dance flats, so they told Risk."

"This thing gets bigger every minute," Whitlock said. "The Petersons, looks like, figure on breaking every outfit in the country—Singleton's Bar Seven, and all the rest—and use the other fellow's money to do it with." He reached through the dark and touched Diego. "You stay behind and back me up," he said. "I'm going to see what's going on over there."

They tied their horses to the fence and Whitlock moved away in the darkness, following the fence around to the barn. At that point, he climbed over and angled across the enclosure until he came to where the box elders touched the pole barrier. Gun in hand, he moved carefully and noiselessly forward through the tall grass and bushes. The lantern was hanging from a dry stub on one of the trees, and Tom Peterson was tramping dirt in the bottom of a shallow, gravelike hole in the ground.

AFTER a moment, Tom Peterson stepped out of the hole, lifted a large bundle from the ground, and threw it unceremoniously into the black pit. Whitlock saw now that the bundle was the dead body of a shaggy dog!

Whitlock was briefly stunned when he discovered Peterson's task to be so cheerless and commonplace. Actually, he'd not known what to expect, but certainly not this. There was nothing criminal about burying a dead dog; burying dead dogs was a commendable idea, and one of which Whitlock highly approved. But dead dogs had nothing to do with his presence on the Peterson ranch.

Whitlock watched until the man had filled the grave and patted the soil down smooth with his shovel. Then Whitlock stepped out of the bushes beside the smoky lantern.

"Kind of late for funerals, ain't it, Tom?" he asked quietly.

Peterson, startled by Whitlock's unexpected appearance, wheeled about and instinctively reached for his gun. But the idea died in motion, killed by the black shine of Whitlock's own weapon.

"Hey, what is this?" Tom yelled, pushing the stringy blond hair from his sweaty forehead. His blue eyes were suddenly black holes in the bony expanse of a harsh face. "Don't wave that thing at me, Whitlock! It's too damn bad a man can't kill a mangy dog without the neighbors flocking in like a bunch of buzzards. What the almighty hell's eating you anyway?"

"Nothing's eating me," Whitlock assured him. "But I don't like the way you been acting lately, Tom. You've just been cutting up too much for your own good, and I don't like the way you been doing it. Turn around while I lift that pistol." He snarled, when Peterson hesitated, "Come on, turn around! And don't get touchy, or I'll crunch your gizzard

with a whole fistful of this." He relieved Peterson of the gun and thrust it into the waisband of his pants. "There, now, wouldn't you say that that is definitely much better."

"By hell, Whitlock," Peterson raged, "this high-handed business had better stop! A man can kill his own dog when he feels like it, and you got no right to stop him."

"I've got a little deputy badge here in my pocket," Whitlock said, "that gives me the right to take you in for killing Roy Cowley, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. So you just as well simmer down."

"Me—killed Cowley!" Peterson stormed. "Your head's full of blue mud, you beady-eyed nitwit. You couldn't prove a thing like that in a month of Sundays. What are you trying to pull on me anyhow!"

"Why, Tom," Whitlock murmured patiently, "I sure can. Yesterday, I came in from fixing fence at eleven o'clock, and just an hour before that you told Frieda about Roy being killed at the bank—remember? Tom, did you know they didn't find Roy's body until ten o'clock yesterday morning? So how could you know—"

Tom Peterson stared helplessly at Whitlock for a moment, and then threw harassed glances right and left into the darkness, and Whitlock knew what thoughts went through the man's brain. He wanted to run, to escape, but was held motionless by Whitlock's grim and shining gun.

"Emmett!" Tom Peterson yelled suddenly, and wildly. "Emmett, where in hell are you? Throw some lead into this—"

A sound of heavy breathing and the scuff of boots interrupted the desperate plea, and Emmett Peterson, hatless and disheveled, staggered into the lantern-light, followed by Juan Diego.

"Here he is," Diego said cheerily. "Bumped his head over there in the dark and he's kind of numb yet, but he'll brighten up directly. . . . "

IT WAS near midnight when Whitlock and Diego, with the two Petersons in tow, filed down Big Slide's main street in search of Sheriff Ben Terry. Growing murmurs of excitement, like a fizzing powder fuse, ran the length of the sleeping town. Lights multiplied in the darkened houses and Buford's saloon disgorged an interested, if somewhat wobbly crowd.

Gradually, the throng drifted toward the jail.

Then Sheriff Terry arrived, tense, unbelieving, and officiously deliberate.

Emmett Peterson was completely subdued, having shouted himself empty on the way to town. Tom had turned sullen and uncommunicative. And Terry, caught between the deep sea of Peterson prestige and the devil of Whitlock's daring charge, tried to be diplomatic. He finally managed to get the four men separated from their horses and from the crowd and into the stern sanctuary of the the jail.

Whitlock, his knotty problem so quickly and satisfactorily solved, told the worried sheriff his reasons for believing the Petersons guilty.

"Bill," Terry said, "this is serious as billy hell. But if you can prove everything why, like you say, I guess you got a reward coming your way."

Whitlock grinned, and a tall wave of satisfaction rolled through him. The thought of blood money had always been distasteful to him, but somehow this was different. He remembered those cattle he wanted, and Frieda's house, and the grin became a chuckle. He had also remembered something else which made him chuckle even louder.

"No fooling, Ben," he said. "And while I'm thinking of it, if you have any trouble locating the money them fellers stole, I might sell you my services on that job, too. You see, I have a peach sprout out at my place that I use to find water veins, and hen's nests, and the end of rainbows. Now, I'll bet my little old glass ball any day that one dead dog can cover many a thousand-dollar bill."

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

①"CLOSE HERD" REFERRED TO CATTLE OR...?

②"PINWHEEL" MEANT A HORSE GOING OVER BACKWARDS OR..?

③"STUBHORN" WAS A BULL WITH BROKEN HORNS OR...?

DOUBLE MEANINGS

④"READING THE SCRIPTURES" MEANT CHURCHGOING OR...?

⑤"REDCOATS" MEANT BRITISH SOLDIERS OR...?

The Answers Are on Page 145—If You MUST Look!

a novelet by CADDO CAMERON

Louie reached down to Concho

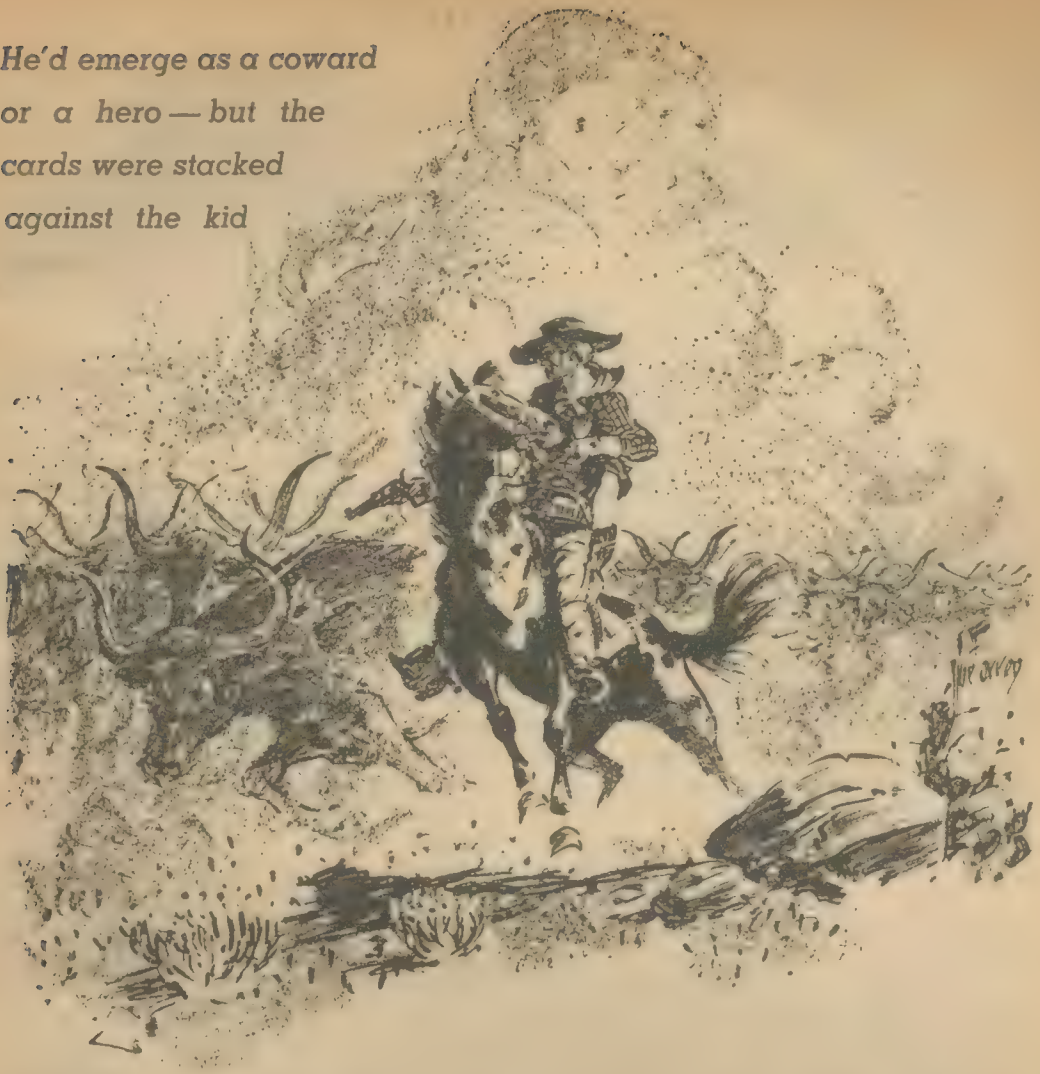
A DEVIL on

1

WHEN Cotton Corwin rode into Bill Walker's cow camp in South Texas at sundown, the crew got their heads together and talked about him as he approached. Though Cot had grown accustomed to this, he didn't like it. He had a pretty good idea what the men who knew him were telling those who didn't.

"So hard on the outside a diamond won't scratch him. Soft inside. A sucker

He'd emerge as a coward or a hero — but the cards were stacked against the kid



for underdogs and things that can't take care of themselves. Gets him in plenty trouble. A bad man to monkey with."

All of which was more or less true. In fact, Cot had come to hit Bill Walker for a riding job he didn't want, simply because Uncle Moses Asche—the peddler, had said he wished Cot were with this trail crew to sort of look out for his son, Louie, who was wrangling its remuda. The boy had learned to rope and ride with the best and wanted very much to get into the cattle business, but he wasn't a cowhand. He was a talented musician, a sensitive fellow who would surely take a beating in any trail driving outfit.

Cot Corwin felt that he owed a big debt of gratitude to the old peddler and his family. A while back he suffered a broken leg while riding an outlaw horse in a San Antonio contest and Uncle

the CATTLE TRAIL

Moses insisted upon taking the homeless bronc rider to his suburban home, where Cot received the finest of medical care and nursing until fit for the saddle again. Uncle Moses made light of what they had done. He reminded Corwin of the time he caught a pair of bandits robbing the peddler and shot it out with them.

EXCEPT for the men on herd the crew was at the wagon, night horses were staked near by, the nighthawk was grazing the remuda toward the river and the cook was waving a pothook. "Come and git it!"

Cot Corwin answered salutations in kind and climbed down from his horse—a tall young man whose light hair looked almost white in contrast to his long, leathery face. Bill Walker lumbered over to shake hands.

"Howdy, Cotton Top—you old man-eater!" boomed Bill. "Heard you were in this Gonzales country and I've been hoping you'd show up, broke and starved and hunting a job. We're shaping up a herd of bank cattle for Abilene and I need another good pointer. You ain't good, but you'll do."

The hands laughed. Cot grinned and looked them over. Knew most of them. A hard band, but cowmen to the marrow. Had to be, or Big Bill wouldn't have them. He boasted that the tougher they were the better he liked them and he never fired a man for anything other than falling down on the job.

"I'm broke and starved, Bill," drawled Cot, "but I hate the thought of riding for you."

"You're hired! Take first guard. Ride at right point. I'll cut you a string in the morning. Grab eating tools."

Cot filled his plate and hunkered down beside a man whom he was surprised to find in this outfit. Concho Charley was at least forty, half Kickapoo, stringy and tough as an old wagon spoke, with a razor-back nose and dark eyes so sharp they seemed to cut or scratch whatever they touched. He was known to be a part-time horsethief, running stuff out of Mexico. Cot remembered that Big Bill and Charley had trouble in San Antonio not long ago. Concho took a licking and swore he'd get square sooner or later. Cot wondered why Walker didn't have better sense than to hire the breed for this drive. He was a vengeful person and with him in the crew, there would be trouble on the trail.

Louie Asche wasn't in sight. Cot inquired, "Strikes me you ain't got enough men to drive a flock of Mexican goats to water, Bill. Is this all of them?"

"Nope. I've got me a flute playing wrangler from the Holy Land and he ain't here now. Little Izzy is out hunting a bunch quitter. Ought to be back soon."

So they're calling him Little Izzy, mused Cot. Have to put a stop to that. Bad for the kid. Make him feel different, like a lost dogey nobody likes.

They were smoking and playing the coffee pot when Louie rode into camp—a closely knit youth weighing about 135, with large eyes set in a sensitive and somewhat wistful face.

Big Bill called out. "Find that damned grulla?"

The boy climbed down. "Yes, Sir." His voice was gentle and polite in tone. "About two miles west. I guess Mousie was heading for his old home on the Nueces."

"Did you whip him back to the remuda like I told you?"

"N-no, Sir. I roped him and led him in."

Bill's face darkened. "From now on, Izzy, you do what I say or your bedding don't ride in my wagon. Savvy?"

"Y-yes, Sir." He said it humbly enough, but red sparks flickered in the boy's eyes.

Louie Asche grabbed Cot's hand and held onto it. His pleasure at finding Corwin here told the tall cowman that this tough outfit had dealt the kid plenty misery during the week he had been on the job.

Bill Walker wanted to know, "Is Izzy a particular friend of yours, Cotton Top?"

With his hand on Louie's shoulder, Cot Corwin looked down at Walker and the others. "Yes, and I'll side him from here to yonder. His name is *Louie*—not Izzy. Sure hope you fellas recollect it. Something else you need to know. Louie wouldn't tell you, but I'll tell you that his folks landed in Texas long before Sam Houston got here and his grandpappy packed a rifle and helped to lick Old Santa Ana. That's more than a lot of Texas men can say about their folks."

Big Bill took an ember from the fire and lit his pipe. He puffed hard, looking at Cot through the smoke. "You're a real cowman, Cotton Top, and I'll take a heap from a cowman, but don't you tromp my toes too reckless. I've got corns!"

Cot grinned at him. "I'll sure watch where I put my feet, Boss. I know how corns hurt, 'cause I've got corns of my own."

BIG BILL WALKER knew cows, cowhands and trail driving. He might kill up his horses and gaunt up his hands, but he'd fatten up his cows on the drive and deliver more beef than he received.

"Don't cripple 'em down, boys," he ordered. "They got a long walk ahead of 'em. I'd rather lose a man than to have a beef go lame on me. I can hire a man in a jiffy, but it takes four years to make prime beef."

Bill worked the hell out of the crew, but no man worked quite so hard as Louie. He did everything but eat and sleep with his horses. Often he would roll out in the middle of the night when the guard was changing and ride down to where the nighthawk was holding the remuda, just to see that they were all right. His love for his horses got him in trouble one morning.

After a hard-riding hand had ridden three or four horses into the ground chousing wild cattle out of the brush and wrestling the brutes on the prairie, in the saddle from the crack of dawn until dark and a night guard to boot, he was mighty likely to be stove up and stiff in the morning. He didn't have much patience with a salty horse that had to be unsalted before it would go to work. He was likely to scratch that little horse good and maybe try to quirt the cussedness out of him. Louie simply hated to see his babies raked by iron and cut by leather that way, so he got to topping off the rough ones for the hands.

Cot was saddling Old Blue, one of his morning horses, when it happened. Trinity Tom had roped out a *bayo coyote* with black mane and tail, tiger stripes on his legs and Satan in his soul. Louie knew Trinity had a temper fit to start a fire with wet fuel.

The kid sidled up to him, and said, "I'm trying to learn to ride. Won't you let me shake the wrinkles out of Old Streak for you this morning? Tell me what I do wrong."

Trinity said, "Sure," and stepped back to watch the fun. Louie laced his hull on that mean bucker and rode him slick—no scratching, whipping or fairgrounding, just the straight-up riding that lots of pitching horses enjoyed.

When Louie climbed off, Trinity allowed, "If you're just learning to ride, me—I ain't been born yet."

Big Bill Walker came lumbering around the wagon. Evidently he had seen and heard it all. He roared at Louie, "Thought I told you not to uncork broncs for these fellas! What d'you think I hired 'em for? You're slowing up the works."

Louie squirmed. "Yes, Sir, but—"

Bill's big palm caught him across the cheek. Left white finger marks and almost lifted the boy off his feet. Louie staggered back. More red sparks exploded in his dark eyes, but he just clamped his lips and knotted his fists and let it go at that.

Bill whirled on Cot. "D'you aim to buy into this game?"

Cot folded his arms and shifted to his other leg. "Nope, none of my business. You're dead right about the rustler topping off for riders. If Louie lets you slap him and get away with it, that's Louie's business."

A few minutes later, the tall bronc rider caught the boy alone and told him, "In case you're wondering why I didn't horn in—when Bill slapped you he treated you as if you were just another rider. He didn't belittle you or make fun of your religion. That slap didn't do you no harm inside where it might leave scars."

Louie's eyes filmed with tears and he almost choked up. "You're right, Cot, and I know it. Do you thing maybe . . . maybe I can get to be a real cowman like you some day?"

Cot Corwin threw a long arm around the boy's shoulders. "Like me, only a damned sight better. You've got brains and education. All I've got is sense enough to savvy cows, gentle mean horses and sling a six-shooter. You'll go high and wide, kid, while I just jog along . . . a-riding in the dust of critters."

II

THE Walker crew received, gathered, road-branded and shaped up a herd of 2,500 big beef steers on Dead Indian Prairie—brands taken over by the bank on mortgages, and they rolled them out at the break of day one February morning. Big Bill had timed it so as to follow the new grass north. If their luck held and every man did a job of work, they'd take those one-gut Texas cattle that could run like rabbits and trail them nearly a thousand miles and bed them down at Abilene with plenty red meat and suet under their hides.

Cot rode at right point, about abreast of the lead cattle. Opposite him, 40 to 50 feet away, rode his partner pointer, Slow Joe. The crew worked in pairs, one on each side—swing, flank and drag riders. Cot and Joe had the place of honor. The other hands more or less ate dust all the time and they'd change places off and on to even things up, but the pointers never moved back and they got off easy on dust unless a tail wind was turning the herd's hair wrong side out. Back of the drags came the wagon with the nighthawk asleep inside and old Billious Bob, the cook, cussing his four-mule team. Behind him, Louie was grazing the remuda along.

Cot Corwin stood in one stirrup and looked back at the half-mile string of longhorns who would probably be his trailmates for 90 to 100 days, maybe more. He knew there would be times when he'd cuss and fight those big steers and they'd do their damndest to kill him and his horse and he'd hate them, but he loved them now. The sight and sound and smell of those steers brought a tightness to his throat. He'd look across the leaders at his partner on the nigh side. A long grin would split Slow Joe's lantern-jawed face. He felt that way, too.

Big Bill rode up from the tail end. He stopped a moment to talk to each rider on Cot's side, but pretty soon reached the point. "Squeeze 'em down and make 'em walk," said Bill. "Shove 'em along for a couple of days. If the critters are leg-weary come night, maybe they'll behave theirselves on the bedground until we get 'em good and trail broke. But no need for me to tell *you* that."

Cot grinned. "It don't never hurt to tell a fella something he *ought* to know. Maybe he don't. I look for us to make a good drive, don't you, Bill?"

"Mm-hunh?" Walker's big jaw hardened.

"Why not?"

"The boys are already talking about hoodooed trail herds they've seen and heard tell of."

"What the hell? There's nothing hoodooed about this herd."

Bill scratched the back of his neck and looked antigodlin at Cot. "The boys say—not me, mind you—but the boys swear Louie is bound to be a plumb hoodoo for this outfit. He ain't our kind, or something."

"Damn!" exploded Cot and he meant it. "Can't we talk 'em out of such a fool notion?"

"I didn't have no luck," growled Bill. "You try it, Cotton Top. I'll scout ahead for a place to noon. Keep 'em walking."

He rode on. In a moment, Bill glanced back. "I told the boys that when I ain't around you're cap'n of this cattle boat. Keep 'em walking."

Corwin signalled Slow Joe and they closed in, squeezing the line of cattle to twenty feet across so as to make them walk a little faster. Meantime, Cot was thinking mighty hard. Some cowmen were superstitious as the devil, particularly on the trail where anything could happen. Put one man in a trail crew to talking about hoodooed herds and he'd work like sourdough in a batch of biscuit dough. Pretty soon the whole outfit would be crawling with hoodoos. Give the Walker herd a run now, or any other tough luck and there'd be hell to pay and no firewater . . . Poor Louie!

AROUND eleven o'clock they threw off and let the cattle feed on good grass while the crew drank hot coffee and ate the dinner Bob had cooked at breakfast. Bill was with the herd, but half the crew was at the wagon when Cot said, "From the way these cows are behaving, fellas, I'll gamble we're putting out on a picnic that lasts clean to Abilene. Those lead steers told Joe and me that all we've got to do is to pilot 'em and they'll take the herd through peaceful. The sign sure is right for a good drive."

The hands looked slyly at old Concho Charley. He ground off a chew of Lorillard, and allowed, "Me—I'm strong for sign, but you can't never tell about sign on the trail. I mind the time when the best dadblamed driving sign I ever seen went plumb wrong. That was a CMF herd from San Patricio, Abilene-bound, and we're a-walking in its hoofprints now. Before we hit the Kansas line we'd lost a hundred head, five horses and one man. A hoodoo fouled the sign."

Cot realized that Charley was chock full of Indian superstitions and the hands would listen to him because of his age and experience. Cot also knew that Concho was a bad man to cross, a man with plenty notches on his gun. Cot went sort of chilly inside.

"A hoodoo?" he asked. "You trying to spook us kids, Charley? What kind of a hoodoo?"

"One of them furriners." Concho spit into the fire. "An Ey-talian. His grandpappy come across the water."

"My grandpa came across the water from Ireland with the McGloin Colony in 1832," said Cot. "Does that make me a furriner?"

"Nope. Irishmen ain't furriners. But take this Ey-talian—he was different from regular folks."

"Tell us about him, Charley." Cot felt the best bet was to talk this thing out.

With long black hair hanging straight down over his ears, Concho Charley looked more like a Kickapoo medicine man than a Texas cowhand. Cot figured he could be afraid of Concho without half trying.

"Far's working stock was concerned," declared Charley, "that Ey-talian made a pretty fair hand, but there was something furrin and unnatural about him. He didn't look or talk or behave like the balance of us. His singing wasn't natural cowhand singing. You couldn't understand a word and it didn't have no regular tune."

Louie was seated beside Cot. He spoke up, "Maybe he was singing Latin love songs or opera, Charley. It does sound different."

Concho speared Louie with a fierce eye. "It was Devil Singing! That's what what it was! Once when I was holding a band of wet horses in the Chisos where Apaches had wiped out a Chihuahua wagon train years before, of a night I'd hear devils a-singing over the bones of dead men. You can't fool me on Devil Singing. I warned the boss and crew, but they never paid me no mind until too late. They swore the Ey-talian was a good hand and a nice boy. Devils are allfired smart at fooling folks that way."

Old Concho stared at the ground before him as if he were looking deep into it and was kind of hypnotized by what he saw. Cot asked him, "What happened?"

"Them CMF cows behaved and walked like pets clean to the Red," continued Charley, "and all the sign was right for a good drive. We crossed 'em into The Nations and I warned the boss and crew again. The Nations is chock full of devils. That Ey-talian's Devil Singing was sure to draw devils."

Old Concho looked deep into the ground again. Out at the remuda a horse nickered for its partner who was under saddle. Down where the herd was loose-held a steer bellowed long and mournfully, homesick already. Lonesome sounds, with no one talking and Old Concho looking into the ground. Cot thought, Damn Old Concho!

PRETTY soon the breed kind of droned on like he was talking to himself. "I'll recollect that night to my dying day. We had watered out and circled 'em loose onto the bedground over in the Chickasaw Nation. It was coming up a storm. The boss put half the crew on guard and told the others to sleep in their spurs. I was on herd. So was that Ey-talian. He was a-singing—said it was a song Ey-talian mamas put their babies to sleep with, but I knowed better. It was Devil Singing. I told the boss it was, but he said, 'Let the boy sing. Them cows like it. Maybe it'll make 'em stop milling and bed down!' "

Old Concho spit into the fire again. "Big black clouds boiled up and lightning set 'em afire. If you had sight like me, you could see devils a-riding them clouds. That Ey-talian singing drawed 'em on, closer and closer. Nary a breath of air and you could smell sulphur. Never sung louder in my life, but I couldn't drown out that Devil Singing. So the clouds come closer and closer. After a while a devil pulled the trigger and they exploded. All hell spilled down on us and the herd. 'THEY'RE A-RUNNING!' we yelled, and them storm devils screeched."

Old Concho gazed into the ground, groaned and sort of swayed his body. Cot glanced at the others. All eyes were on Concho as if he had them roped and tied to him. Cups hung loose in hands, dribbling coffee and cigarettes were scorching fingers. But no one seemed to mind. They watched Old Concho—waiting. Louie edged over until his shoulder touched Cot's arm . . . Damn Old Concho!

"Too dark to spit if it hadn't been for the lightning and the blue fire that flickered over men, horses and cattle," muttered Charley. "Three thousand head a-running and Old Droophorn in the lead. He's a big brindled coaster, right horn knocked down and rooted solid that way. I rode like a drunk Indian to head Old Droophorn and turn him and threw 'em into a mill. I come up on his nigh side.

"Now, everybody knows that a stampede always mills to the right. I flashed my slicker in his face. He swung left. He might nigh upset my horse under the hoofs of that herd. I quirted that steer. I scorched his jaw with my six-shooter. Then I drove a bullet into the quick of his left horn. He wouldn't turn right. It wasn't natural. I knowed a devil was a-forking that big brindled steer. I swung away to the left point and helped the boys over there, but I kept an eye on Old Droophorn. Pretty soon I seen a sight I'd give anything to forget."

Old Concho's eyes went to drilling the ground again. Cot asked gruffly, "What did you see?"

"A devil a-straddle of that big brindled steer. Its legs and arms were tongues of blue fire. Its head was a ball of blue fire and its face was that of that infernal Ey-talian!"

Some of the hands cussed hoarsely. Everyone looked at Louie. He moved a little closer to Cot.

Old Concho growled, "That Ey-talian kept a-slapping Old Droophorn on the ride side with a blue fire arm and that's why I couldn't turn the steer right. From fifty feet away, I emptied my six-shooter into that blue fire devil."

Concho Charley's eyes were burning

now, like a man with fever and out of his head. They burned into the ground for what seemed like a long time. The boy they called Sabine couldn't wait. In a husky half-whisper, he wanted to know, "Then what happened?"

"When they finally stopped running, we found that Ey-talian," replied Charley. "We found him and his horse buried

the others mutter something. He said calmly, "You're a liar, Charley. If there's a hoodoo in this outfit, you're it."

Old Concho shifted his eyes to the ground and they burned into it. If anyone drew a breath, Cot didn't catch them at it. This was the showdown. It had to come. It had to be faced straight across the board. Cot realized that if

— THERE'S GOLD IN THEM TREES —

DOWNIEVILLE, California, though largely remembered for its Sons of Sudden Death and the hanging of Juanita, had its jokers too.

Jack Smith was industriously working his river-side claim one day in the 1850s when a stranger, followed by a heavily laden burro, approached. Jack, wanting no competition, replied to the stranger's inquiries there was nothing much in the soil, but the trees were loaded—"richest in the whole goddam Sy-era", was the way Jack put it. To prove his point he palmed a nugget then seemingly extracted it from the bark of a jack pine.

The stranger immediately began examining the other trees, but Jack warned him off, stating this cluster was his. "The trees up yonder haven't been worked," Jack said, "but you'll have to climb higher there. The trees is larger and have carried the nuggets a-way up."

The stranger climbed. As soon as he was perched on the highest limb, Jack gathered a group of miners to laugh him down. "Imagine a man looking for gold in the tree tops," Jack scoffed.

But Jack a little later discovered the fickleness of Fate himself. When his claim petered out, Jack promptly "salted" it and collared a suitable greenhorn to purchase the ground.

In seeming generosity, Jack agreed to let the greenhorn work the claim for a day before purchase. But instead of finding the salted gold, his inexperienced efforts pulled down the river banks into Jack's claim. Consequently the greenhorn found nothing and refused to buy. Jack was left with the tedious job of shoveling away tons of earth to reclaim his salted gold, after which he disgustedly abandoned the claim.

A following prospector who took up the abandoned claim free, in a few months dug a fortune from the hole.

—Jack Benton

by forty steers where they'd gone over a thirty-foot bluff."

His fiery eyes darted at the intent faces around him. "I don't miss a natural man at fifty feet, but they wasn't a bullet mark on that damned furriner!"

Old Concho looked straight at Louie. His voice was raspy and mean. "You're a furriner. That infernal flute of your'n makes music that a natural man can't understand. Devil Singing! *You're a hoodoo and you'll draw devils on the trail!*"

Louie caught his breath. Cot heard the situation wasn't unsnarled now, no telling what would happen to Louie.

Keeping a sharp watch on Concho, the lean gunfighter uncoiled to his feet. His light eyes turned several shades lighter and he wasn't pleasant to look at.

"I called you a liar, Charley," he declared quietly. "That's a mistake. You're a *damned* liar and plumb crazy to boot. Make your fight, if you've got a fight in you!"

Old Concho didn't look up. He shook his head slowly, and said, "I've got plenty fight in me, but I know when to turn it loose. My medicine tells me.

My medicine tells me I'd be a fool to fight Cot Corwin."

III

COT felt that Concho wasn't afraid. He was convinced that the breed had treachery up his sleeve. At any rate, he had put Corwin in a spot where his only out was to lick the situation with talk. Either that or walk off the job and take Louie with him. He had never walked off a job. A real cowman didn't quit when the going was tough. So he made his talk.

"If you won't fight, then keep your cussed mouth shut about hoodoos from here to Abilene," he began. "To show how crazy a man can get and what a liar you are—any fool knows that you can't turn a droophorn against its low horn when the critter is excited. It sees that horn out of the corner of its eye and wants to run away from it. The brute is crazy then, but no crazier than you were when you saw a blue fire devil a-straddle of that steer. Far as blue fire is concerned, we've all seen it in electrical storms."

Cot glanced at the hands. His talk had jerked them out of their trance. They were nodding heads at one another and looking scornfully at Old Concho. But Corwin was afraid it wouldn't last. Put a man alone on a horse in a strange country at night with nothing to do but think and he was likely to go seeing and hearing things.

"And take that Italian you called a furriner and a hoodoo," continued Cot. The poor fella made a hand and died with his horse a-fighting to save the herd. That's a hell of a sight more'n you did, what with your hoodoos and devils and such."

Old Concho looked at the ground as if he wasn't listening. Cot pointed a finger at him. "Another thing. Louie ain't a furriner. He's Texas to the bone. In any kind of ruckus, I'll back him to hang and rattle when you've been throwed and are climbing the fence for dear life. Any more talk from you about Louie being a hoodoo and I'll *make* you fight—damn you!"

Old Concho drew crazy lines on the ground with his finger. "My medicine says, 'Tell Cot Corwin to wait and see' . . . My medicine is a *good* medicine."

THEY walked the herd fifteen miles the first day, put them across the Guadalupe and eased them onto a fine bedground a safe distance beyond. The cattle were chock full of grass, leg weary and logy with water and they bedded like milch cows, but Big Bill put half the crew on herd and split the night into two guards.

It was hot when Cot and the first guard took over, but they knew that a cool Gulf breeze would come up from the south before long and be going good by ten o'clock. Louie was eager to learn everything he could. He asked Bill if he might stand part of Cot's guard with him. The trail boss consented and Cot told the boy to bring his music stick along and play lullabies to the cattle. He didn't say so, but what Corwin really wanted was to make a fool out of Old Concho and his Devil Music. The breed was on second guard.

The moon was big and not a cloud in sight, the kind of night trail drivers dreamed about. Juan Parida and Frio walked their horses around the bedded herd one way while Slow Joe and Cot moved in the opposite direction, the riders spread out so that no part of the circle was left unguarded. They sang some easy-going tune so as not to surprise dozing cattle when their horses passed. Besides, many cows liked music.

Cot led Louie's horse while the boy played on his flute. He played the old songs they all knew, only he made them sound better, as if some bird was singing them; and he played music that was strange to men like Cot Corwin and wild cattle that were no wilder than the men. Cot listened raptly, thinking, If that's Devil Music, then hell ain't as bad as they make it out. But I'd say it

must be the kind of music angles sing.

And Cot was pleased to see that the cows liked that music a-plenty. Ornery old loghorns would swivel their hairy ears around back-and-forth to follow the flute and once in a while they'd groan with comfort and satisfaction, sounds a night-herder loved to hear. Some particularly flighty brutes usually remained on their feet long after the others were down, but tonight those nervous steers soon hit the hay. Meeting on the rounds, the hands paused to talk about what the flute did to wild cattle and wished they could play one of the things. Cot felt mighty good, figuring this hoodoo business was licked to a frazzle. Louie was making a hand. Soon the kid would be one of the boys.

The breeze came up from the Gulf on time. It puffed through low brush and grass as if it was bound and determined to blow all the mosquitoes away and carry the smell of a Texas herd to the north pole. From a little bush it presently picked off something white in the moonlight. The breeze carried that thing skipping over the grass and flung it into the face of a nervous, outside critter who had just laid down! The herd jumped the bedground as if it were a single steer!

They all ran in the same direction, north across a two-mile prairie. Close packed, climbing each other, horns clacking like dry sticks and hooves building thunder, they roared away without knowing where to or why.

"THEY'RE A-RUNNING!" yelled the night guards.

Their night horses went crazy, too. Cot's Big Red almost jumped through his bridle to follow the cattle, but Corwin reined him in enough to swing down and pick up that white thing. Just a piece of paper. He shoved it into his pocket and took after the herd. Louie was pounding leather close by, but Cot waved toward the remuda and yelled in the boy's ear, "WE'LL NEED FRESH HORSES! GIT!"

Cot knew that a stampede was a good place to get killed. Men went crazy fighting a stampede. If they saw Louie in the heat of battle and thought of the hoodoo business, no telling what might happen.

The herd ran away from Corwin. It would take time for him to reach the point and other hands were already there, so he hung back to keep up the corners and round in small runs of cattle when they tried to split and scatter. They hadn't gone far before here came Big Bill Walker with Concho Charley, El Paso Ed, Sabine, Pease River Pete and Trinity Tom. Bill dropped Sabine to help Cot and galloped down the left flank with the others, all riding and yelling like men gone wild.

Big Bill judged time and speed exactly right, then threw his weight against the left point and soon had the crazy stampede circling like a snake trying to swallow its tail. The crew rode around them like Indians corralling a wagon train. They drove quitters back into the mill. They let them run until their tongues hung out and the brutes quit.

Not a head was lost and no men or horses were hurt, but it was an evil-tempered bunch of riders who circled the cattle, for they knew the herd was spoiled. They bedded them there and held them close. When he was leaving, Cot told those steers, "You sons-of-dogs, you'll go to hell when you die!"

Big Bill rode down to the wagon with him for breakfast. "Chances are we'll have trouble with the critters from now on," growled Bill, "all on account of a piece of paper. How come it happened to be hanging on a bush away out here, miles from nowhere?"

"Hard to tell," replied Cot. "It's a little paper sack that smells of eating tobacco and was stained by it. I reckon some fella threw it away and the thing hung up on that bush."

THERE was no laughing and few grins on the second day's drive. The fight in every man lay close beneath the surface of him and he was quick to turn

it loose on a cow, horse or another man. It was bound to be that way when a crew figured it had a spoiled herd on its hands and many miles yet to go. They made those steers rattle their hocks fifteen miles the second day, filled their paunches with grass and water, then bedded them down with a curse and a prayer.

Big Bill rode back to the wagon with the first guard when they went to eat and change horses before taking over the herd. He had split the night into two watches again. Concho Charley was riding up from timber on the creek and Cot wanted to know why he wasn't on herd with the second guard.

"Charley allowed he'd lost something or other," said Bill, "and I told him he could go down the trail and look for it. What in hell has got into that little bay he's a-forking? I know that horse. It's gentle as a dog, but look at it wring its tail and sling its head and do its damnedest to pitch. I know the devil has got into our men and cows, but don't tell me that our horses have caught it, too."

The other hands looked hard at Bill. Cot spoke up quickly, "Don't *you* go to talking about devils and hoodoos and such, Boss, or you'll spook the whole cussed outfit."

"You're dead right, Cotton Top," admitted Big Bill.

When they reached the wagon Concho Charley had shucked the bay, dropped his rigging at the cook's woodpile and gone to rope out his night horse. He was saddling up as the first guard hunkered down to eat. Bill asked him, "Were you gimleting the little red horse to make him act up that way?"

"Not a bit," growled Old Concho. "He's got sight, that horse has. He knows devils are on the trail of this outfit and he's trying to let us know."

Cot started to speak up. Bill shook his head at him, and told Concho, "Git, you damned old hoodoo! Another word out of you and I'll wear you out with the double of a rope."

Concho swung aboard. He looked down at the others and said in a mournful voice, "My medicine says for you to wait and see. My medicine is a *good* medicine." Then he rode away.

Bill glared around the semicircle and rumbled, "I betcha he's a damned old witch and it'll take a silver bullet to kill him."

Cot and Louie tried without success to make talk during supper. Slow Joe, Juan Perida, Frio and Big Bill wouldn't talk—just wolfed their grub as if it wasn't fit to eat and they wanted to get it down without tasting the stuff. Frio was sitting cross-legged near the wood pile. Suddenly he dropped his plate and cup and sprang to his feet. He jerked his six-shooter and drove two bullets into the wood. They all came up, ready to fight.

"Damned copperhead!" exploded Frio.

He pulled the snake out with a stick and held it up squirming and bleeding, a whopper with a three-inch head carrying enough poison to kill a horse. Frio growled, "Maybe there *is* something in what Charley says about devils trailing this herd."

"I dragged in that wood," said Louie. "I gathered and tied it by hand and know there wasn't a snake in it. Of course, I might have caught the thing on the way in."

"Yeah," muttered Cot, "or maybe one of those sticks was turned into a copperhead. Never can tell about devils."

It was plain to see that his poking fun at devils didn't go over with the others. Traditional cowhand superstition had hold of the crew. Since the stampede they had been looking at Louie out of the corners of their eyes, with never a grin or a joke for the polite and hard-working boy. The situation looked bad to Corwin. He wished Louie would hit for home, but swore to himself that if the kid had the nerve to stick it out he'd stick along and do his best for Louie.

IV

ONE thing Cot knew he should do right away, though he hated to do it. He

would rather fight old Concho than to tell Big Bill he'd better fire the man, but Concho wouldn't fight. While saddling his night horse after supper, Corwin got hold of Bill. Making certain that nobody else could hear, he said, "About the run last night and the copperhead this evening—I've got suspicions."

"So have I," growled Bill. "I suspicion The Old Devil."

"You're crazy, Boss. Recollect the trouble you had with Concho Charley in San 'tonio a while back?"

"Sure, but what's that got to do with stampedes and snakes?"

"The fella that told me about it said Charley swore up and down he'd get you sooner or later—get you where it would hurt the worst. Didn't Concho say that, Bill?"

"Yeah, but—"

"And the best way to hurt you would be to make you fall down on your job as trail boss. Charley aims to spoil this drive, Bill, and make you look bad."

Big Bill scowled at the toe of his boot. "Wouldn't put it past him. But you can't prove a cussed thing on him."

"Maybe not," admitted Cot, "but I can show mighty good grounds for suspicion. Bend an ear to this. A paper sack spooked 'em last night. I just happened to see where it came from. It could've been hung there by somebody who knew a stiff breeze comes up at a certain hour every night this time of the year. Yeah, and it had to be done *after* the wind fell yesterday evening. Sound reasonable?"

"Uh-huh. I'm a listening."

"The sack still contained the stain and smell of chawing tobacco and Old Concho is the only man in this outfit who uses it."

"Yep. He smokes a pipe, too. Go on."

"Charley wouldn't want 'em to jump the bedground while he was on guard, so he thinks up this slick scheme to use the sack and the night breeze. He knows the sack will blow away before he comes on at midnight. Am I foolish?"

"You're foolish, all right, but maybe not about this. That takes care of the sack. Now, talk about the snake."

"Recollect how Concho Charley's gentle horse was behaving when he rode up from the creek this evening," asked Cot, "and don't you know how a horse hates the smell of a poison snake?"

"Hell, yes!"

"Concho had that snake aboard when he rode up and dropped his rigging at the woodpile—in his *morral*, probably. Copperheads love wood piles. He knew it would slip out and crawl into the wood. Sound sensible?"

"Not sensible enough to hurt. Anything else?"

"So I've got to prove it was Concho's snake. All right, Boss. You go and get the thing and tell the boys you're carrying it out of camp so it won't worry the horses. Before you throw it away, look in the critter's mouth."

Big Bill grunted and went to get the snake. He carried it off. Pretty soon he came back, walking faster than he went. He shoved his big jaw at Corwin, and demanded, "Talk, you snow-capped maneater! I think *you're* a devil. How did you know that copperhead's fangs had been pulled?"

Cot's long face split in a wide grin. "Old Concho is mean, but he ain't mean enough to turn a poison snake loose in a cow camp, not even to get square with a fella as cussed as you are."

Big Bill snorted.

Corwin went on sheepishly, "I recollect the time I caught me a big rattler, made him strike the tail of my ducking coat and hang up by his fangs, then I jerked 'em out and carried him home to the bunkhouse and turned him loose in there at night. What I mean, Boss—that was fun, even if the old jughead I was riding did mighty nigh pile me before I unloaded that stinking snake off'n him."

Big Bill Walker grinned through his troubles. But he quickly got serious again. "Maybe that was fun for you, but this ain't no fun for me. I figured Charley was out to get Louie, but now I can see that he's after me. I don't mind that.

I can take care of myself. But the old scalawag is a danger to the herd and the balance of my boys. They say trouble is your meat, Cotton Top. What d'you reckon I'd ought to do about old Concho?"

"Fire him and run him off with dogs."

Bill shook his head. "Any *poor* boss can fire a man, but it takes a *good* boss to keep that man and make him behave. I hate to fire a man, Cotton Top. Makes me feel like I'm not doing my job."

"It took a man to say that, Boss," declared Cot. "I'd rather you didn't fire him. Let's you and me ride a close herd on Charley, even if we don't get a wink of sleep from here to Abilene. We can sleep when we get there."

Big Bill put his hand on Cot's shoulder. "You'll do to ride the river with, Cotton Top. I'll let you have Charley on first guard. Tell him to come and eat, then go back on herd this evening."

THE moon was big, no clouds, not a breath of wind, the herd was bedded loose on a nice rise of ground in mesquite grass that matted thick and soft, the cattle were dog-tired and their paunches drum-tight with feed and water, but they wouldn't lie down for long: fidgety and apprehensive. Steers would lift their heads and test the air, swivel their ears and switch their tails, see a brute that was trying to get a little rest and go and hook him to his feet, as if to say, "Get up and get ready to run. Something awful is due to happen. I can feel it in my bones."

It was hard for Corwin to keep from thinking, Old Concho is right. There's a devil dogging our trail.

The guard rode slowly around them, several rods out so as to give them plenty of room and the hands thanked their lucky stars for the moon. A walking horse wouldn't stumble in that light. Cot put Concho Charley ahead of him and Louie, going one way, while Slow Joe and Frio moved around the other way. The boy played on his flute. He played like angels singing, but a devil wouldn't let the cattle sleep.

Cot followed close enough to old Concho to watch every move he made. Had to admit that he never saw a better man at standing guard over a flighty herd. Charley kept his distance, sung something soothing, spoke firm but soft to critters that wanted to take a walk, didn't wave his arms or make sudden noises, and when he lit his pipe he did it inside his hat so that no sliver of light was showing. Shortly before time for relief he dropped the pipe and reached down from the saddle and picked it up without making a move that so much as caused a cow brute to flick an ear. Cot thought, Old Concho could make a hand in any man's outfit.

Big Bill came up with the second guard at midnight. "How they stacking, Cotton Top?"

"They're fixing to explode, Boss. Any little thing will touch 'em off. Keep an eye on that gotch-eared roan there, holding his head high like he's a-hankering for far places. Better hold the whole crew on herd and pray for an army to come and help us."

Bill looked off across the bedground, fingering the bristles on his jaw. "If they're bound and determined to run, ten men can't keep 'em from it. Go and hit the hay, but sleep in your boots with both ears cocked."

Cot hadn't slept more than two snores and a whistle before an earthquake jerked him up and sent him galloping to his horse with a yell, "THEY'RE A-RUNNING!"

THEY ran north, open ground under and ahead of them and a stiff breeze behind them. Big Bill was working in the lead and the second guard rode at both points, for the boss had evidently said to let them run for a while before trying to turn them. Smart handling, thought Cot. The cattle were tired. They had plenty of room to run and when they got some of it out of their systems they'd be easier to throw into a mill. Corwin came up on the left flank with Slow Joe, Frio, Concho Charley and Louie. The

kid was riding hell-bent at Cot's stirrup and he didn't have the heart to send him back.

The crew went boiling along with the close-packed mass of cattle—a dark monster with 5,000 bulging eyeballs and the moon glistening on them, 5,000 sharp horns and moonbeams glancing off them, and 10,000 rumbling hooves that carried more than 2,000,000 pounds of death and destruction gone crazy. A sight fit to make a man think of his past and figure his hereafter was mighty close.

Suddenly, the herd split. A new run of cattle pronged off between Slow Joe and Frio on one side—Concho Charley, Louie and Cot on the other. Corwin yelled to the hands, but couldn't hear it himself. Then he whirled and lifted his horse into the lead of this run, figuring to carry them a ways instead of trying to throw them back, for he saw that he'd have almost half the herd. Concho and Louie sided him. They hit a fast lick and pulled away from the leaders to make them run to catch up and wear the brutes down while they still had room to run.

Old Concho was riding in one stirrup, looking back when it happened. His horse put a foot in a hole and turned over, breaking its neck. Charley fell clear and rolled like the fine rider he was, but couldn't make it to his feet without help. Louie was between Cot and Concho. Louie sat his big black on its tail bones. He reached down to Concho. These things happened in a split second and were all Corwin saw of the disaster.

Cot spun Old Skewball on his hind legs and man and horse fell to fighting the stampede, doing their damnedest to split the lead cattle and make them cut around Louie and Charlie. A longhorn wouldn't run over you if he could help it, but put a million pounds behind him and he had to go regardless. Corwin shot three steers running side-by-side, dropping them in their tracks. Two wild-eyed brutes clambered on top of the fallen ones and he piled five of them there. That split the point like driftwood in a river. His gun was empty, so they fought the on-rushing torrent of cattle fist and skull—Old Skewball and Cot.

Corwin was scared and so was his big night horse. Each had seen what those sharp hoof would do to a man and horse. Old Skew laid his ears flat, reared, struck with forefeet, ripped off hide with his teeth, whirled like lightning and broke ribs and knocked off horns with his heels. Meantime, Cot Corwin kept his seat on a volcano and fought the stampede with feet, spurs and quirt, cussing and growling and moaning to himself until he was as crazy as the maniac brutes themselves. It seemed to him like hours, but it could have been only seconds before he saw Louie's black dart away in the lead, *carrying double!*

V

COT'S crowd finally threw their run into a mill and wore them out. About that time Big Bill Walker showed up at a lope.

"Good work, Cotton Top!" he boomed. "Anybody hurt? I seen all that's left of Charley's horse and rigging back yonder."

Corwin described Concho's fall and what Louie did, and added, "We lost one horse and five head that I shot, and Charley had the wind knocked out of him a-plenty. He'd of gone with his horse if it hadn't been for Louie."

"Uh-huh, Louie and *you*," said Bill.

"Don't forget my Old Skewball. What touched 'em off?"

"Fire."

"What the—!" exclaimed Cot.

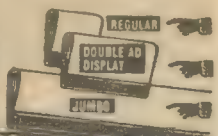
"Yeah, a little blaze that started in a mat of mesquite grass just south of the herd. It came up almost under Pete's horse. He piled off and beat it out quick, or by now we'd have fire all over this part of Texas. Not enough new grass to stop it. Wish to hell I knew who dropped that butt."

"It wasn't a cigarette, Bill," declared Cot soberly. He went on to describe how

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.



SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-653, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 618-T FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

LAW...

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before.
More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48 page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" Books FREE. Send NOW.
LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 6329L Chicago 5, Ill.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. HA-58, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

EAR ACHE?
DENT'S
EAR WAX DROPS for fast temporary relief of accumulated wax condition
TOOTHACHE?
ask your druggist for DENT'S TOOTH GUM, TOOTH DROPS or POULTICE

BE A Nurse
LEARN AT HOME

Practical nurses are needed in every community... doctors rely on them... patients appreciate their cheerful, expert care. You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. 54th yr. Earn while learning. High School not required. Men, women, 18 to 60. Trial plan. Write now!
CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 426, 41 East Pearson Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name .....
City ..... State ..... Age .....

Concho Charley dropped his pipe shortly before going off guard. "He gambled that pipe coals would smolder in this curly mesquite until long after we'd gone down to the wagon, so nobody would be suspicious of him. Sound reasonable?"

"I'll tell a man it does!" growled Big Bill. "Whereabouts is that dirty—?"

Cot interrupted him. "Yonder they come now, Old Concho and Louie riding double like twins. Take it easy, Boss. Let's see if Charley doesn't want to talk some."

"He'd better!" muttered Bill. The big trail boss settled himself deep in the wood like a man getting fixed for anything and hoping it was bad.

Old Concho slid off and came over close to Bill. The breed's eyes were steady, his voice level and hard. "Boss, Louie is the best damned boy that ever forked leather and I'm a snake in the grass. Shoot me. I've got it coming."

Bill grunted. "That's what I figured. Go on."

"I carried in that copperhead and I spooked the cattle," confessed Concho, "and this is how I done it."

"We know how you done it. Tell us why."

"To get square with you," admitted Charley. "I'm a cowman, so now I'm mighty sorry I spoilt this drive. I'm so damned ashamed of myself, I almost wish I was back there with my horse. He was a good horse, Boss, a better man than I am."

Big Bill Walker looked hard at Concho, then stuck out his hand. "Shake, you ornery old son-of-a-dog!"

THEY reshaped the herd, strung them out and got a good count, rounded in the few head that tallied short, and Bill swore he'd hold them in this open country until they calmed down even if it took a month. He told Charley to ride into San Antonio and get a new saddle, for there wasn't much left of his old one. Louie wrote a long letter to his folks and gave it to Concho to deliver.

The boy was hero of the outfit now. The hands couldn't do enough for him. They were so nice to him, it got the kid all flustered and he didn't know what to do or say. Cot watched him closely and was glad to see that his head didn't swell.

At breakfast one morning, Big Bill threw an arm around Louie's shoulders and boomed out, "Looky here, boy! As our rustler, you're fired. You done graduated from nursing the remuda. I told Charley to pick up another boy while he's in town. You got you a regular riding job now, with a string of your own."

Louie Asche's soft eyes filled with tears. He swallowed and looked at Cot and tried to say something, then the hands all laughed and swore they'd lay the chaps on him if he bellowed.

Two days after Concho returned a big surprise landed on the outfit. A man came with a letter from the bank and he brought two cattle buyers along. The bank said it had decided to sell off the herd, trail delivery, and the new owners would finish the drive with their own crew. The hands figured that must be a mighty fine bank, for the letter said each man would be paid a month's bonus wages for good work and there would be a big banquet at Schmidt's Restaurant & Beer Garden waiting for them in San Antonio.

The Bill Walker crew hit town with a whoop and a holler. No one hollered any louder than old Concho Charley when he turned his wolf loose. Being an all-time cowman and part-time horsethief, he had money to burn. When they dragged their spurs onto Military Plaza, Charley picked up Louie and put the kid a-straddle of his neck. He headed for the nearest saloon, sat Louie on the bar and bought lager beer for the house.

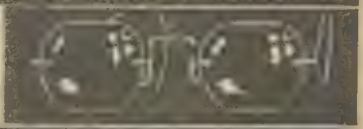
"Old River Lager is on a rise, boys!" he squalled. "She's big swimming, so strip naked and dive in headforemost. You're drinking to the best damned Texas man that ever saved a horsethief's life!"

It went that way all around the plaza.

[*Turn page*]

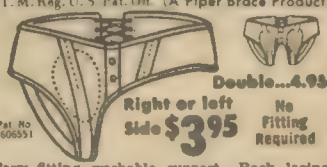
GUARANTEED BITE-PROOF!
NEW NYLON BIT
TASTELESS! CUSHION BITE
MEDICO V.F.Q. FILTER PIPE

$2
ASSORTED STYLES
Throw Away Nicotine
TRAPPED IN MEDICO'S FILTER

EYE GLASSES by MAIL As low as $1.95
WRITE for FREE CATALOG with 14 LENS SAMPLE CARD
Thousands of Customers Est. 1939

QUALITY READING-MAGNIFYING OR BIFOCAL GLASSES FOR FAR AND NEAR
ADVANCE SPECTACLE COMPANY, Inc.
537 S. Dearborn St., Dept. T-4 Chicago 5, Illinois

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 60. Swedish Massage graduates make big money working full or spare time with doctors or in hospitals, health resorts, sanatoriums, clubs, private practice. A dignified interesting career! Qualify for your graduation certificate. Thorough instruction at home as in class rooms. Write for Illustrated Book—FREE!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dept. 363-G, 41 E. Pearson, Chicago 11

RUPTURE-EASER
T.M. Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Product)

Pat. No. 2606551
Double...4.95
Right or left side $3.95
No Fitting Required
A strong, form-fitting washable support. Back lacing adjustable. Snaps up in front. Adjustable leg strap. Soft, flat groin pad. No steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort. Also used as after operation support. For men, women and children. Mail orders give measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and state right or left side or double. We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s.
Over 500,000 Satisfied Users! 10 Day Trial Offer
Money-back guarantee if you don't get blessed relief
Delay may be serious — ORDER TODAY!
PIPER BRACE CO.
811 Wyandotte Dept. TF-63 Kansas City 5, Mo.

313 HARD-TO-GET ALL-DIFFERENT STAMPS—25¢

SPECIAL IMPORTED COLLECTION
incl. BEAUTIFUL GERMAN
MONA LISA

A sensational imported collection of 313 all-different stamps including these valuable showpieces: GERMANY—beautiful Mona Lisa; HUNGARY Diamond Shapes—3 largest sport stamps ever issued; SAN MARINO—3 new bicolored triangles! You also get hundreds of other unusual stamps and sets from all over the world—Andorra, Indonesia, Korea, Israel, etc. It's a guaranteed $2.50 value! Total of 313 stamps are yours for only 25¢ to introduce our Bargain Approvals. Money back if not delighted. Send 25¢ today. ASK FOR LOT HM-Z

PLUS FREE "Midget Encyclopedia of Stamps"—Includes Stamp Identifier and Dictionary—plus terrific bargains!

ZENITH CO. 81 Willoughby St. Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

Sensational Device Tests Eyes

SAVE up to $15.00 on Glasses! Big news to the millions of Spectacle Wearers and Prospects. Means Freedom from Outrageous Prices. Sold on Money-back Guarantee.

MAKE BIG MONEY QUICK—FREE SAMPLE KIT! Show it to friends and others. Let them use it Free and watch their amazement over this Self Testing system. Here is a great new opportunity in a tremendous new field of unlimited possibilities. Spare or full time. No experience needed. Write for Free sample kit.

C. G. Optical Co., Dept. A-166, 20 E. Delaware Pl., Chicago 11, Ill.

Find HIDDEN TREASURES

GEIGER COUNTERS for Uranium Detection (see at left). TREASURE DETECTORS for gold, silver, etc. Light-weight, ultra sensitive. None finer at ANY PRICE. New models available.

INFORMATION FREE

Detectron CO. Dept. 27
5631 Cahuenga, No. Hollywood, Calif.

STOP TOBACCO

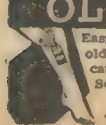
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.

In Business Since 1909

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton Sta. St. Louis 5, Mo.

OLD LEG SORES



Easy to use Viscose applications may heal many old leg sores by relieving venous congestion if caused by varicose veins, leg swelling or injuries. Send to-day for book and trial plan.

T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn St. Chicago 2, Ill.

Big Bill made the boys stick to beer so as to have them middling sober for the banquet that evening.

Louie Asche was placed at the head of the table with Cot Corwin on his right and Bill Walker on his left. The boy was mighty proud, but it was plain to see that his head hadn't swelled. In fact, Cot thought Louie had grown older suddenly, like a serious man trying to live up to a good reputation that he figured he hadn't earned.

Presently, in walked little Uncle Moses Asche. His soft eyes sparkled and a happy smile parted his wavy beard. The old peddler was known far and wide in South Texas, esteemed and respected by all. The crew gave him a big cheer and Cot yelled, "Speech!"

Uncle Moses went around behind Louie and put his hands on the boy's shoulders. "Men, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for the way you have treated my Louie. I hope and pray he'll prove to be the man you say he is. Now, son, you talk while your papa listens to see whether you talk like a Texas man should."

LOUIE gave Uncle Moses his chair and stood behind his father. He turned all shades of red and stuttered as if he had misplaced every word he knew. Finally, Louie got started. "Much obliged for everything, boys. There's plenty I could say, but all I will say is simply this. I owned that herd. Had a bill-of-sale in my pocket all the time. I've been dying to get into the cattle business. Papa bought those brands from the bank and gave them to me before we commenced to gather."

It took the hands all of thirty seconds to catch their breath, then they let out a big yell.

Pretty soon, Louie was able to go on. "When you said the herd was spoiled and would cause trouble all the way to Abilene, I wrote and asked Papa to get us a buyer before we went any farther. He did and we made a nice profit."

That called for more yells. The hands

whooped it up.

Louie smiled down at his dad, then smiled at everyone else. "My papa will do to tie to, boys. And besides, he's a smart business man. With a money panic on, he figures this is the time to buy cattle. So he bought the San Tomas outfit with its land, buildings and brands, and he deeded it to me lock, stock and barrel."

By that time the crew was too flabbergasted to do any more than cuss soft and low. The San Tomas was a mighty fine spread, a combination horse-and-cow outfit whose brands were known and respected.

Louie went on, "I know better than to try to bŏss the outfit myself, so I'll need a general manager and the man I want is . . . Cot Corwin. What say, Cot? Give me your chair and get up and say it."

Cot couldn't say. All his words had hit for tall timber. Just the kind of job he had always dreamed about!

While he stood there like a sandhill crane with epizootic, Louie grinned up at him. "Will you give me a riding job, Cot?"

"You're hired!" blurted the drifting bronc rider, who would drift no longer. "You and I will work the horse end of the business. Bill Walker and the balance of the boys will nurse our cows and drive 'em to market, but we'll put old Concho Charley to riding line, a-throwing back stray devils."

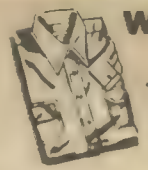
Answers to
COW COUNTRY QUIZ

(See Page 127)

●

1. Cheek-to-cheek dancing.
2. Spinning a pistol with finger in trigger-guard, also called the border roll.
3. A man scarred from many fights.
4. Giving orders; laying down the law.
5. Royal Canadian Northwest Mounted Police.

SAVE 75% ON



WORK CLOTHES!

SURPLUS STOCK FROM MIDWEST SUPPLY FIRM!

Terrific values you've got to see to believe!

SHIRTS 79c

Made to sell for 2.99! Now Only 4 for $2.99

What a buy! 4 for the price of one! These shirts, though used, are washed, sterilized and ready for long, tough wear. In blue or tan. *Send name, address, neck size.*

PANTS *to match* 99c

Sold for 3.95 now only . . . . 4 for $3.75

Unbelievable Bargains! *Send waist measure and inside leg length.*

COVERALLS . . . wear 'em used and save plenty! Originally 5.95. Now only $1.95

Send chest measurement. 3 for $5.45

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED! Money back if you're not convinced these are bargains you can't beat! You can't lose so order TODAY for immediate delivery! Pay postman or send money with your order and save postage.

GALCO SALES CO. Dept. 526

4064 East 71st Street • Cleveland 5, Ohio

FORM FITTING, FULL TYPE

AUTO SEAT PLASTI-COVER

$2.98

Set for front & back seats $4.98

Earich your car with these extraordinary covers. Not a THROW-TYPE, covers entire front seat. Waterproof, greaseproof, stainproof—Wipes clean with damp rag. Choose from our everlasting "TRU-TONE" colors in stripes, with maroon, blue, green, or gray background, or life-like leopard skin pattern. Give year and make of car, split or solid back and color desired.

The Liberty Bell, Dept. TF-1, Elkins Park, Pa.

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write: CLUTHE SONS, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A's earn $5,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroughly at home in spare time for C. P. A's examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A's. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays."

LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 6329H, Chicago 5, Ill.

"My eyes are my trademark!"

When you see Eddie Cantor's famous banjo eyes, you look for comedy, humor, a touch of pathos — a real virtuoso performance.

And when you see a familiar brand name as you shop, you expect an equally outstanding performance — or you don't buy the product again.

That's one big advantage about living in a land where you enjoy free choice among many fine products, each identified by its own brand name.

Leading manufacturers, seeking to win your favor for their brands, take infinite pains and a great deal of pride in bringing you wonderful products, continuously improved, representing unusual value for your money.

As you leaf through the pages of this magazine, note how many of the products advertised here already have satisfied you. And always *remember* that when you name your brand, you better your brand of living!

BRAND NAMES FOUNDATION

INCORPORATED

A Non-Profit Educational Foundation
37 West 57th Street, New York 19, New York

HERNIA VICTIMS—ATTENTION!

STOP WEARING

CUMBERSOME, BULKY, ANNOYING BRACERS — FOR RUPTURE COMFORT!
GET NEW AMAZING COMFORT WITH NEW EASER—THE **WRIGHT-EASER**—
THE SENSATIONAL **EASER** FOR YOUR **RUPTURE!**

RIGHT OR LEFT SIDE

$3.95

DOUBLE

$4.95

NO FITTING REQUIRED

Easily Adjusted

FOR MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN

INVISIBLE UNDER CLOTHING

THE WRIGHT-EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE

THE WRIGHT-EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE MUST BE THE BEST EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE YOU EVER WORE, IT MUST GIVE YOU MORE COMFORT AND BETTER RELIEF OR YOU GET EVERY CENT BACK AT ONCE!

No matter how many easers you have tried for youir rupture, we believe: NO OTHER EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE CAN DO FOR YOU MORE THAN WRIGHT-EASER! . . . The WRIGHT-EASER IS A WASHABLE SUPPORT, it s STRONG, FORM FITTING AND SCIENTIFIICALLY DESIGNED TO GIVE YOU RELIEF AND COMFORT! No laces to bother with . . . simply step into it . . . adjust the leg strap and side straps . . . that's all! Soft-flat groin pad—NO STEEL, NO LEATHER BANDS! Many use it as after operation support . . . FITS SO WELL!! . . . It does NOT SHOW THROUGH CLOTHING—washes like a dream . . . NO ONE!—NOT EVEN YOUR DANCING PARTNER, CAN TELL YOU ARE WEARING IT. Easily adjusted to your own comfort!

- **NO FITTING REQUIRED** . . . simply send us your measurement in inches around the lowest part of abdomen . . . specify right or left side or double.
- **NEW—AMAZING HERNIA SUPPORT.** Thousands of people have switcihed to and stuck to the WRIGHT-EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE for new comfort—after trying old-fashioned expens-ve devices!
- **MODERN—SANITARY** . . . Fits comfortably—washes and dries quickly, you never offend with the WRIGHT-EASER FOR YOUR RUPTURE.

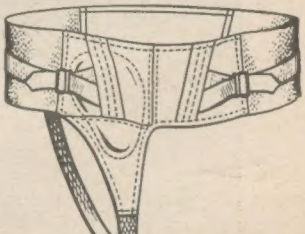
WRIGHT BRACER CO,, DEPT. 32
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

READ WHAT OTHER USERS SAY:

H. B., New York City, wires: "Send another WRIGHT-EASER, it enables me to work on my printing press 7 hours a day."

Mr. K. L., of Chicago, writes: "Rush me another so I'll have one to change off with. It's the most comfortable and gives me more relief than any I ever had." *Mr. M. B., of Paterson, N. J. says*: "It's made my life worth living—rush me another one, it's the most important thing I own."

IT MUST GIVE MORE COMFORT AND RELIEF OR MONEY BACK!



BE SURE TO GIVE YOUR SIZE AND SIDE WHEN ORDERING!

MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY! NOW! SENT ON APPROVAL!

WRIGHT BRACER CO., Dept. 32
318 Market St., Newark, New Jersey

YES! PLEASE RUSH MY "WRIGHT-EASER" on approval. If not delighted I may return within ten days. ☐ I enclose $3.95 for one side type. ☐ I enclose $4.95 for double type. (I save up to 75c postage by sending payment with order.)

Right side ☐ $3.95
Left side ☐ $3.95
Double ☐ $4.95

Measure around lowest part of my abdomen is..... inches.

Name.....
Address.....
City & State.....

SOLD ON 10 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

New, Amazing Offer—Now Easy To Own A Typewriter

For ONLY **$9.98** DOWN

THIS NEW EASY-TO-PAY CLUB PLAN DELIVERS TO YOUR HOME A Guaranteed Factory Sealed ALL-NEW Remington PORTABLE TYPEWRITER

EARN $20, $30, $40 and more each week at home in your spare time with your typewriter.

MODEL A
$87.50
Plus $5.48 Fed. Tax
$9.98 down
$7.44 per month

This Booklet "How To Earn Money At Home In Your Spare Time On Your Portable Typewriter" will be included with your typewriter. Many people are now earning money at home addressing envelopes, typing menus, etc., etc. This booklet shows how to get that kind of work, what to charge, etc.

YES only $9.98 delivers the ALL-NEW factory sealed Remington Typewriter to your home, carrying case included. The balance of only $7.44 per month makes it very little to pay. The total price is only $87.50 plus $5.48 Fed. tax. It makes a wonderful gift for the boy or girl in high school or college—typed work usually gets better school marks. Makes it easy for dad to carry on his business trips. When you type on a Remington Portable the entire writing line is visible. Make money at home with it in your spare time (Booklet sent with typewriter shows how easy it can be done!). Each typewriter carries a factory warranty. An amazing ALL-NEW personal typewriter.

Don't Be Without A Typewriter—Rush $9.98 With Coupon Today!

NOW, only $9.98 DELIVERS THE AMAZING NEW REMINGTON QUIET-RITER PORTABLE, balance only $8.32 per month, (PRICE $97.50 plus $6.08 tax), carrying case included.

QUIET-RITER $97.50 plus $6.08 Fed. excise tax • $9.98 down $8.32 per month

The ONLY office typewriter in personal size. It's years ahead in styling, in construction, and in features. Has amazing "miracle tab," gives positive tabular stop control, with a stop for every space on the machine—and a simplified ribbon changer, and finger fitted keys.

Order this Remington Quiet-riter, factory sealed in carrying case, today.

This smartly styled carrying case is included at no extra charge with both models.

IMMEDIATE DELIVERY

SLOAN and PETERS, Dept. 77
318 Market Street, Newark, New Jersey

☐ I enclose $9.98 send the "ALL NEW" Remington Portable. I will make monthly payments of $7.44. Include booklet on "How To Earn Money At Home" and carrying case. I understand this is a factory sealed typewriter with a factory warranty.

☐ I enclose $9.98 send the Remington "Quiet-riter" portable and carrying case plus booklet. I will pay $8.32 per month. I understand this is a factory sealed typewriter with a factory warranty.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zone ____ State _____

Note: You may send full price if you wish.

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER